THE *Ethics* OF *Suicide*

Historical Sources

MARGARET PABST BATTIN

Editor

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INTRODUCTION

The Ethics of Suicide

Is suicide wrong, always wrong, or profoundly morally wrong? Or is it *almost* always wrong but excusable in a few cases? Or is it sometimes morally permissible? Is it not intrinsically wrong at all, though perhaps often imprudent? Is it sick? Is it a matter of mental illness? Is it a private or a social act? Is it something the family, community, or society should always try to prevent, or could ever expect of a person? Could it sometimes be a "noble duty"? Or is it solely a personal matter, perhaps a matter of right based in individual liberties, or even a fundamental human right?

This spectrum of views about the *ethics* of ending one's own life—from the view that doing so is profoundly morally wrong, the gravest of sins, to the view that it is a matter of basic human right, and from the view that it is primarily a private matter to the view that it is largely a social one—lies at the root of contemporary practical controversies over how we die. These practical, often overlapping controversies include at least six specific issues of historical and contemporary salience:

- *physician-assisted suicide in terminal illness*, the focus of intense debate in parts of the world with long life expectancies and high-tech medical systems, particularly the Netherlands, the United States, the U.K., Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, and Australia;
- *hunger strikes and suicides of social protest*, as in Turkey, Northern Ireland, wartime Vietnam, China, Tibet under Chinese rule, and the Middle East following the 2010 self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor that touched off the "Arab Spring";
- *self-sacrifice and martyrdom*, often distinguished from suicide, a distinction drawn in differing places in different religious traditions;
- *religious and ritual practices that lead to death* (especially *sati* or widow-burning, *harakiri* or ritual disembowelment, and ritual "fasting unto death," called *samadhi*, *santhara*, or *sallekhana*, as sometimes practiced in Jain and other communities in India);
- *suicides of honor or loyalty*, ranging from the voluntary deaths of a king's wives and retainers in many traditional cultures to deaths of shame or support for a superior; and
- *suicide bombings* and related forms of self-destruction employed as military, guerilla, or terrorist tactics, including kamikazi attacks in wartime Japan, suicide missions by groups from Tamil separatists to al-Qaeda, and suicide bombings in the conflicts in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Beneath these specific practical issues lies the question of the role a person may play in his or her own death. The focus here is on self-caused death, or suicide, and how it should be regarded from an ethical point of view. This collection of primary sources, in both the bound volume and the associated Digital Archive, is intended to facilitate exploration of such current practical issues by exhibiting the astonishingly diverse range of thinking about suicide throughout human intellectual history, in its full range of cultures and traditions. This collection has no interest in taking sides in these debates; rather, it hopes to expand the character of the rather linear recent debates on issues like physician-assisted suicide, suicide in social protest, and suicide bombing by making

them, as it were, multidimensional. This is what a rich acquaintance with history and the diversity of cultures brings.

For much of the 20th and on into the 21st century, at least in the West and in regions affected by Western colonialism, thinking about suicide has been normatively monolithic. Suicide has come to be seen by the public, and particularly by health professionals, as primarily a matter of mental illness, perhaps compounded by biochemical and genetic factors and by social stressors, the sad result of depression or other, often treatable, diseases—a tragedy to be prevented. With the exception of the debate over suicide in terminal illness, also called "aid-in-dying" or "death with dignity," the only substantive discussions about suicide in contemporary Western culture have concerned whether access to psychotherapy, improved suicide-prevention programs, or more effective antidepressant medications should form the principal lines of defense.

Indeed, suicide very often *is* a tragedy, and depression or other mental illness is often in play. However, a full exploration of historical and cross-cultural thought concerning suicide must also explore the many additional ways in which the phenomenon of self-destruction has also been understood—some of them bizarre, many of them profound. A full exploration seeks to broaden the current largely monolithic view, not replace it, and to provide a much wider context for understanding contemporary issues about a person's role in his or her own death.

This volume and the associated Digital Archive are intended as a comprehensive source-book, a collection of primary texts covering as fully as possible the immense range of thinking about the ethics of suicide in both the Western and non-Western traditions, as well as in both literate and oral cultures—in short, the full range of human discussion and dispute that leads up to current times. It is particularly concerned with philosophical reflection on the morality of suicide. This takes many different forms: some texts are lengthy and discursive scholarly expositions; other texts involve vivid stories with implicit rather than explicit messages; some are firsthand accounts; others are secondary observations; some are exploratory; others are didactic or admonitory; and so on. There is a rich diversity here in the kinds of materials presented, as there is in the eras and cultures from which they come.

The History of Reflection on Suicide

The Western record of discussion and dispute about the morality of suicide begins almost four millennia ago with a rather personal dialogue between a man and his soul, a dialogue dating from the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt. Writing on suicide continues with the early Hebrew texts that record—without ethical comment—a handful of figures who caused their own deaths, among them Samson (who pulled the temple down upon himself, as well as the Philistines), Saul, and Saul's armor bearer. In a different culture, ancient Greece, Plato developed a some-what inchoate classification of acceptable and unacceptable suicides, including those subject to burial restrictions (like the Athenian practice of burying the hand apart) and those that were not; Aristotle took suicide generally to damage the state. In the following centuries, the Greek and Roman Stoics came to celebrate suicide as the act of the wise man, while the Christian church fathers, like the Jewish rabbis, though developing teachings that celebrated martyrdom, at the same time increasingly vigorously condemned suicide as sin; this view solidified during the period from Augustine through the time of Thomas Aquinas. Some Enlightenment writers defended suicide; some Romantic writers glorified it; and still others, like some Protestant clergy in 18th century America, denounced it in the most vitriolic terms. What is remarkable is the huge

variety of accounts these writers give, both religious and secular, of what makes suicide wrong, or ethically neutral, or right.

Debate in the Western tradition continued apace until roughly the time of Durkheim and Freud at the beginning of the 20th century, with their respective theories of suicide as socially conditioned and as pathological. These thinkers in effect silenced the ethical debate, since they saw suicide as socially or psychiatrically caused rather than chosen. This laid the foundation for the view that, if suicide is not voluntarily chosen in any robust sense, it cannot be said to be culpable—not morally wrong, not sinful, and not criminal. Although debate over individual responsibility for suicide still continues, it has until recently been largely obscured by the dominant professional view that suicide is a product of mental illness, committed by people in the grip of depression or other psychopathology, hence incapable of reasoning clearly, and that, therefore, there really is no *ethical* issue here.

At the same time, however, views about self-caused and self-willed death have been evolving in Asia and the Middle East, beginning with ancient Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Islam, in India, early China, Southeast Asia, and Japan. These views have been carried forward within different religious and cultural traditions, often modified and intensified, but nevertheless each typically preserving a characteristic, unique, and fundamental ethical stance. In addition, over long spans of time, oral cultures in the Arctic, Africa, Oceania, and North, Central, and South America have been evolving, often including practices involving suicide and related forms of self-caused, self-willed death. From the practices of these cultures, it is possible to infer (though such inferences always involve a considerable degree of conjecture) the background normative views on which they rest. These views, and the practices in which they are exhibited, are often strikingly different from those of the literate cultures of the East and the West.

To be sure, reliance on historical accounts is far more problematic in oral traditions than it is in literate cultures that are able to preserve firsthand documents over long periods of time. For traditional oral cultures, contact with indigenous practices concerning suicide and the background worldviews and belief systems in which they are embedded is, to a considerable degree, filtered through Western eyes, since the written records from which the views of oral cultures can be distilled have become available only with the incursion of explorers, missionaries, conquistadores, adventurers, and amateur ethnographers, themselves largely from Western cultures. Just the same, the older sources from these cultures are invaluable since, despite their distortions, they depict societies comparatively innocent of Westernized attitudes about suicide.

Of course, it cannot be assumed that views of all the members of the various eras and cultures about suicide, whether in Western, Eastern, or traditional oral cultures, were or are alike. Cultures are rarely homogenous groups, but rather living collections of people whose views may differ considerably, though they may appear uniform when contrasted with the views of members of other cultures.

The Evolution of Views and Practices over Time

This collection is organized chronologically, even though dating, particularly of early texts, is often imprecise, and the identities of authors and sources are unclear. Chronological organization makes it possible to trace the development of thought about the morality of suicide in a culture over time. One might examine, for example, the development of thinking in Judaism,

from the Hebrew Bible and its origins in the 12th–9th centuries B.C., through Josephus in the 1st century A.D., to the rabbinic writers and the Babylonian Talmud of the 3rd–6th centuries A.D., to the 10th-century Karaite writer Ya'qub al-Qirqisani, the Tosafist writers of the 12th–14th centuries, and on to Luria in the 16th century, Margoliouth in the 19th, and Szmul Zygielbojm in the 20th, whose wrenching suicide note in May of 1943 offers his own death in protest against the Allies' indifference to the evolving holocaust for Polish Jews. Or one might examine the Japanese tradition, beginning with Daidoji Yuzan's portrait of medieval Japan's *Bushido* military and chivalric culture; then Chikamatsu's plays and the developing tradition of love-suicide; then Lord Redesdale's account of *hara-kiri*; and finally the letters from kamikaze pilots written just before their final missions in World War II. Or one might explore the entwined traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, beginning with the ancient Vedas and Upanishads of the 15th–5th centuries B.C.; the Dharmashastra law codes of the 7th century B.C. to the 1st century A.D.; the writings associated with the Buddha's contemporary Mahavira, revered as the founder of Jainism; the *Questions of King Milinda*, an interchange between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the Buddhist monk Nagasena, dating from roughly 100 B.C. to 200 A.D.; the Lotus Sutra, composed sometime during the first several centuries A.D.; Bana from the late 6th century–early 7th century A.D.; an anonymous late 19th-century Hindu widow describing *sati* or widow-burning; and on to figures of the 20th and 21st century, Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh. Evolving concerns address (although in quite different ways) self-sacrifice as a form of social protest; self-immolation as a form of political protest; and the survival of the ancient Jain tradition of elective death in the form of ritual self-starvation, often in the modern context of terminal illness. These are long and rich traditions of reflection on this issue.

Although the various historical traditions initially developed independently, they came to interact and often mirror each other over time. For example, reflection on suicide within Judaism began long before the development of Christianity, but in the Talmudic period and during the Middle Ages, Judaism's view of suicide appears to have evolved in part in tandem with that of Christianity; both exhibited an intensifying condemnation and prohibition of suicide, even though the specific details never fully coincided. Islam first arose several centuries after the view that suicide is almost always wrong had pervaded both Christianity and Judaism; Islam's view remained comparatively uniform over time. But such mirroring is rarely perfect. While Islam's repudiation of suicide in many ways parallels that of Judaism and Christianity, the distinctions these three traditions each draw between suicide and martyrdom may seem to fall in somewhat different places. Meanwhile, in the Far East, the evolution of Hindu spirituality and its fusion with Buddhist views about the illusoriness of life affected thinking about suicide in Confucian China, and in turn contributed to the *Bushido* tradition of medieval Japan that lionized suicide, which in turn played a major role in Japan's military tactics in World War II. In still other areas of the globe, late medieval Catholic attitudes about the sinfulness of suicide were brought to the central and southern parts of the New World by Spanish conquistadores and the missionaries who traveled with them, while Protestant attitudes—no more tolerant of the sin they saw in suicide than were Catholic attitudes—were imported into Africa, India, North America, and other places colonized largely by Protestant nations.

The chronological organization of this collection also makes it possible to see one individual writer's engagement with practices of another culture, as for instance the 19th-century German

idealist philosopher Schopenhauer's celebration of the practice of fasting unto death that had developed in Jainism. It also makes it possible to observe one author's or one culture's distortions of the views of another, as for instance Lactantius' exaggerations of the views of Roman Stoics or al-Ghazali's dismissive account of Hindu practices, as well as the extraordinary exaggerations of Christian conquerors and colonizers about the practices of peoples they subdued.

Chronological reflection on suicide is not easily accomplished, however, with respect to texts from oral cultures. It is usually impossible to determine in a reliable way the duration or scope of the views of the culture described. The texts themselves are often fragmentary or erratically preserved. And there is the ubiquitous problem of cultural overlay by foreign observers. Consequently, these selections are grouped together, entered in the chronological listing by the date of the earliest report. This permits at least a partial view of the range of beliefs and practices within a culture or a group of cultures, though they are filtered through the eyes of outside observers, the only sources available. It also makes it easier to see something of the philosophical assumptions concerning suicide prevalent in the intruding cultures, and hence easier to interpret Western texts written at about the same time. Although the texts of all traditions, both Western and non-Western, require interpretation, and though all texts can pose problems for readers from other cultures, the records of oral cultures require a double inference, both in extrapolating from practices described to the views that may have motivated them, and in subtracting as much as possible the overlay of Western, alien ideology (including its racist, sexist, and paternalist attitudes about "inferior" or "infantile" cultures) that also shapes such accounts. For this reason, an effort has been made to use the oldest accounts of an oral culture's beliefs and practices, not only because they are temporally closer to pre-contact times but also because the ideological overlay—since it comes from an earlier period of Western history and is thus more evident to contemporary eyes—may be easier to subtract. In any case, whether in continuing oral traditions or in early observers' accounts, there is no "pure" version of these views—and yet they represent some of the most varied, interesting, and challenging of those available.

A second partial exception to the chronological organization of this volume occurs with respect to cultures with highly sophisticated oral traditions capable of preserving material with considerable accuracy over long periods of time—early Islam, for example—so that the date of composition of written texts like the *Quran* and the *Hadiths* may be several centuries later than the actual genesis of the material. Further complicating the chronological presentation of sources, many significant texts are no longer extant, including not only individual works like Plutarch's *On the Soul*, but virtually the entire corpus of a culture (as, e.g., all but three Mayan codices destroyed at the time of Western contact, all but one copy of disapproved books burned under the Qin dynasty, and almost the entire libraries of Baghdad and Nalanda).

It is of course not possible to include all texts from all authors, at all times, in all cultures; this would fill libraries. However, some of the authors included in this volume are allies here, themselves providing quite rich surveys of the then-known previous literature. John Donne does this for Western religious literature; Montaigne does this for secular, classical literature; and many other authors discuss and critique earlier works in the traditions within which they wrote. The unmeetable challenge of including everything of interest within the covers of a single bound volume is to some degree mitigated by the associated online Digital Archive; but even so, there are many authors and traditions that have not yet been discovered here. Reflection

about self-caused death is something that has occupied thinkers in virtually every culture, and, given its saliency in medical practice, military action, social protest, and self-sacrifice, will no doubt continue to do so.

Conceptual Issues: Similarities and Differences among Traditions

There are many apparent parallels in thinking about suicide. For example, Greek and Roman Stoics saw suicide as rational and sensible in certain sorts of circumstances, as did the *Bushido* tradition in Japan; so have many indigenous cultures in the Americas, Oceania, and Africa, where dying to accompany one's king or lord into the afterlife, or to keep the sun in its course, or to minimize the economic burden of the elderly in an economically marginal society was deemed the appropriate, rational thing to do. Of course, these are loose parallels, and there are many differences among these traditions' views as well. It is important to remain sensitive to background differences in cultural assumptions about metaphysical, epistemological, and religious issues, as well as quite different systems of morality, even while noting striking parallels among texts and practices.

Nevertheless, similar elements and common problems are numerous, even across distant traditions. For example, for some traditions, like early and Talmudic Judaism, the early Christianity of St. Ignatius and later Christian theologians, and both traditional and contemporary Islam, the line between suicide and martyrdom—one prohibited, the other permitted and indeed celebrated—is very finely drawn, though in subtly different ways. Similarly, the line between the desire to die and suicide is also very finely drawn; this is true for writers from St. Paul and Angela of Foligno to Gandhi. Some writers and cultures think it ignoble to die in bed, deteriorating from illness: for the Vikings, the Yoruba, *Bushido* warriors, and Iglulik Inuit, death by violence, including death by suicide, is the more noble way. Then, too, writers in very different cultures have been concerned with quelling fashions for suicide: Plutarch, for example, describes an ingenious method of stopping the fad among the maidens of Miletus; similarly, Huang Liu-hung, a 17th-century provincial Chinese administrator, and Caleb Fleming, a fiercely conservative "dissenting" 18th-century English divine, both think exposing the naked body of a suicide in a public place is the most effective deterrent; so too the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who spoke of shaming by public hanging of the body of "every self-murderer, Lord or peasant," though he did not insist that the body be unclothed. On the other hand, some writers and playwrights have been accused of fomenting fashions for suicide (Chikamatsu and Goethe, for instance) whether for thwarted love or to avoid descent into an ordinary, mundane existence. Roman generals, Japanese warriors, inhabitants of the Cook Islands in Polynesia, and kamikaze pilots have been alike in seeing military defeat as an occasion for suicide. Cultures in China, Africa, native North America, the Inca empire, Viking-controlled northern Europe, and pre-colonial and colonial India have seen suicide and/or voluntary submission to being killed as an appropriate part of funerary customs, especially for wives and retainers of kings and nobles. Although such parallels are never exact, they are nevertheless instructive.

There are conceptual similarities and differences among traditions as well. The distinctions between killing and letting die, between self-killing and being killed, between being killed at one's request and killing oneself, or between self-killing and provoking another into killing oneself make an enormous difference in some cultures (Judaism, Christianity,

Islam) but little in others (Viking culture, Buddhism). Politically motivated suicide may look very different in the East than in the West, partly because political systems are so different and partly because assumptions about what a person would accomplish by self-sacrifice or suicide are different. Different authors and cultures have sharply different views about whether concerns about the impact of a suicide on surviving family members or one's society are important. Some think suicide is largely an individual matter (for example, the Roman philosopher Seneca, who in his famous Letter 70 wrote that "Every man ought to make his life acceptable to others besides himself, but his death to himself alone," and Paul-Louis Landsberg, who died in the Oranienburg concentration camp in 1943). For others (like those in kin-based societies, where the suicide of a young or middle-aged person breaks up social networks but the suicide of an elderly person who has ceased to play such roles does not), suicide is a social issue.

The scope of suicide prohibitions also varies widely, as does the matter of whether exceptions are ever to be made. Then there are group suicides (the mass suicide at Masada described by Josephus, or the ritual self-disembowelment of the 47 Ronins, mass suicides of Japanese troops in the face of defeat in WWII, or even the ultimate mass suicide of the whole human race imagined by Novalis and by Eduard von Hartmann). There are suicides of protest and social protest in many times and places and for many politically diverse reasons: Lucretia, Cato, Thich Quang Duc, and Yukio Mishima. Contemporary hunger strikers, suicide bombers, and those who immolate themselves to defend political or religious freedom may also belong in these categories. In some cultures, especially in Africa, suicide is often understood as revenge; in others, it is conceptualized primarily as altruistic, even when some self-killings are clearly egocentric; in some, it is understood as a matter of individual choice, however socially plausible the choice of death in that person's specific circumstances may seem to be. Tracing these similarities and parallels is invited by this collection, but at the same time, the recognition of huge and often very subtle differences among authors and cultures is also encouraged.

Definition and Linguistic Issues

To note such similarities and differences raises the issue of definition: exactly *what* counts as suicide? Some definitions are extremely narrow; they count only cases in which a person has knowingly and voluntarily acted in a way that directly and intentionally caused his or her own death, with the intention that death result; others are more flexible, including cases of semi-intentional self-killing, semi-accidental self-killing, self-harm that results in the extinction of cognitive capacities though not the physical body, extreme asceticism that results in death, high-risk exploration, sports and other self-endangering activities, self-killing in which the person acts knowingly and voluntarily but does not want to die or wants to achieve some other goal, and so on. It can be argued that terminological differences often serve to mark views about the morality of self-killing in various circumstances or for various reasons, and that the wide range of terms used in cases of voluntary, knowing causation of one's own death serves this purpose. "Suicide" is normally differentiated (in English) from "self-sacrifice," "martyrdom," "acquiescence in death," "aid-in-dying," "victim-precipitated homicide," "self-deliverance," and a variety of other terms, but the primary texts, providing the original wording, invite attention to the subtleties of these differences. Then too some authors employ unconventional definitions

of suicide: for example, Lactantius' insistence that the death of Cato, the Stoic example par excellence of praiseworthy suicide, was actually a homicide; Mao Zedong's view that the death of Miss Zhao, a young peasant woman in 1919 China who slit her own throat rather than submit to an arranged marriage, was actually murder; but also, equally unconventional, John Donne's claim that the death of Jesus Christ, the Christian example par excellence of an unjust execution, was actually a suicide.

Linguistic issues also arise in attempts to refer to the performance of the act of suicide. The expression "commit suicide" has been common; contemporary suicidologists typically use a variety of less stigmatizing alternatives, including "suicided," "completed suicide," and "died by suicide." Depending on the background view of the ethics of suicide, these variant descriptions disguise much—or disguise little.

Problems of definition also arise as a product of translation from one language to another. Just as English had no unique term for suicide until the mid-1600s, when, for example, Walter Charleton used it in his *Ephesian and Cimmerian Matrons* ("to vindicate ones self from extream, and otherwise inevitable Calamity, by *Sui-cide* is not [certainly] a Crime, but an act of Heroique Fortitude"), many other languages refer to this phenomenon in different ways. Greek, Latin, and other European languages did not have an explicit, unique term for suicide, though they had a wide variety of locutions. While English has just one principal term for it, "suicide," German has four:"*Selbstmord*," "*Selbsttötung*," "*Suizid*," and "*Freitod*," the first three of which have varyingly negative or neutral connotations, but the fourth of which has generally positive ones; this means that German speakers can talk about suicide in a range of ways that English speakers cannot. Wider exploration would no doubt reveal differences among other languages as well.

Issues of definition are also important in examining the practices of traditional cultures. The only available early reports of practices in oral cultures, especially those made by clerics, conquistadores, and others not trained in ethnography, may distort the meanings of native words considerably. For example, in the Seneca myth called the *Code of Handsome Lake*, Edward Cornplanter speaks of "sin" and of the "Great Spirit"; these are probably imported concepts and mistranslations influenced by European sources, even if there is no adequate correct translation in English. On the other hand, some traditional practices that are not apparently conceptualized as suicide might meet contemporary Western definitions, insofar as they involve the knowing and voluntary taking of an action intended to bring about one's own death. For example, the traditional practice of the Gā people of western Africa of holding individuals accountable for dying at times or in ways that are impermissible suggests that these deaths are understood as a matter of voluntary choice. So are the *sallekhana* or *santhara* deaths by ritual fasting that form the central austerity of the Jains, said to be practiced over 200 times a year in contemporary India. These are not understood as suicide by the group in question but might well be by outside observers, as for instance in court challenges to the practice in contemporary India on the grounds that it is a "social evil" and a violation of Indian law prohibiting suicide. Then again, some practices that are apparently conceptualized as suicide and, given the group's beliefs, would meet common Western definitional criteria are nevertheless strikingly at odds with Western categories, such as the Mohave belief that stillborn infants are suicides, beings who (knowingly) surveyed the world into which they were about to be born but (voluntarily and deliberately) decided against it.

Negative Cases

This sourcebook also tries to recognize—though to do so exhaustively would prove impossible—the significance of *negative* cases: the writings or accounts of individuals who did not consider suicide (like Angela of Foligno) though it might have been a plausible consequence of their reasoning; or who were urged toward suicide but did not do it (like Job, taunted by his wife); of authors who did not discuss it or address it directly (especially John Stuart Mill, who, given his views about liberty and impairment, could have been expected to do so far more fully than in his few scattered remarks); of texts where it is hinted at, if at all, only by implication (Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*); of cultures (e.g., the Tiv of central Africa) where it was apparently not practiced; and religious traditions where it was barely mentioned at all (e.g., Shinto, although it coexisted with *Bushido* culture). This is a tricky matter but an important one if the full range of thought about suicide is to be displayed. What is not thought, not done, and not said about this issue can play an immense role in reflection and action about life and death as well.

The Bases of Analysis

Among the many issues raised by the full range of views on suicide is the question of the bases of analysis. This collection focuses on the *ethical* issues in suicide, but there are substantial differences in just what it is that is to be assessed. Is it the act itself that is the focus of normative assessment? Is it the intention under which it is done? Is it the pattern of behavior or cultural tradition within which it occurs? Is it the outcome of the act, its effects on other individuals or social groups, and if so, how broad is the scope of these effects?

Issues concerning the bases of analysis challenge traditional classifications used in the assessment of ethical issues in suicide. Of particular importance in this collection is the fact that no attempt has been made to differentiate what Durkheim understood as societally caused "institutional" suicide from the sorts of suicide usually understood under the label "suicide" in Western, professional contexts—roughly, between suicide expected in certain circumstances as a normal part of the practices of a culture, as distinct from suicide that is conceptualized as the individual's own idiosyncratic act, whether reasoned or the product of mental illness or psychopathology. The sources in this collection clearly reveal that the line between "institutional" and "individual" suicide is not nearly as sharp as is often assumed, and that even in the anomic modern industrial cultures of which Durkheim spoke, individuals respond to quite subtle societal expectations. The West has seen only a few clear examples of what it recognizes as institutional suicide: the expectation that the Prussian army officer unable to pay his gambling debts kill himself, for example, or that the captain go down with his ship. Yet the expectation of, say, early Christianity that martyrdom is to be sought, or of Romantic culture (evident in Goethe's *Werther)* that suicide may be preferable to a life of ordinariness may not seem institutional at all until examined against the broader backdrop of contrasting eras and cultures.

Issues of the bases of analysis are also involved in differentiating between suicide and euthanatic suicide, suicide and protest suicide, religiously motivated and ritual suicide, suicide and tactical suicide, or sorting out suicide by causes or motives like despair or revenge. They are also relevant in discerning differences in views of suicide as pathological—Hippocrates' account of suicide in premenstrual dysphoric disorder, for example, or Sophocles' portrait of the mad ravings of Ajax and his subsequent remorse, or Burton's

portrait of the anatomy of melancholy. They are relevant in understanding the enormous variation in ways that suicide can be conceptualized as understandable, noble, or indeed praiseworthy, as in Thich Nhat Hanh's description of the suicide of the monk Thich Giac Thanh, which, like that of Thich Quang Duc and other Buddhist monks and nuns protesting the Diem regime during the Vietnam War, involved deliberate self-immolation. Their acts are portrayed as deaths of principle, a difficult act but one undertaken in a fully reflective, thoughtful, aware way, one with deep roots in the Buddhist tradition, and one in which psychopathology plays no role. Nevertheless, the term "suicide" is rejected, even though these self-immolations are undertaken knowingly, deliberately, with extensive prior training and preparation, and with full awareness of the consequences. Mao's account of Miss Zhao is also one of resistance to an abusive society: is it a pathological suicide, a protest suicide, or what? Or is it resistance that simply takes the wrong form? In Mao's view, Miss Zhao should not have killed herself but stayed alive to join the revolutionary effort. A selection from the Islamic *jihad* tradition poses the issue of tactical suicide in a contemporary light; it too illuminates the earlier distinction between suicide and martyrdom drawn in Islam since its beginning, and raises the issue of whether this distinction has been distorted for political ends.

Two selections from the early days of contemporary Western bioethics sketch some of the very extensive argumentation played out in the ferment over physician-assisted suicide, one from an English defender of rational suicide and "planned death," the barrister Mary Rose Barrington, and one from an American opponent, the bioethicist Daniel Callahan. In the writings of both, the tensions between autonomous choice and the finality of terminal illness, as well as risk of abuse, play a real role. That the issue at hand is now frequently referred to not as "suicide" but as "assisted dying," "aid-in-dying," or "death with dignity" points not only to political strategy but also to questions about the bases of analysis and the deeper philosophical issues such a practice raises. The final selection, from an American philosopher using a Wittgensteinian form of analysis, emphasizes the complexity of the term "suicide" itself and makes it clear that this label alone cannot provide a firm foundation for moral judgments.

Even in the seemingly most isolated cases, the act of suicide is necessarily connected with background views about the meaning of death, the value of life, the relationship between the individual and the community, the nature of suffering, the significance of punishment, the existence of an afterlife, the nature of the self, and many other deep philosophical questions. The issue of suicide challenges all of these. As Camus is so often quoted, "There is but one truly philosophical question, and that is the issue of suicide." Just one thing is clear. A full understanding of suicide cannot *start* with the assumption that all suicide is pathological, that it can almost always be attributed to depression or mental illness, that it is a matter of biochemical abnormality, that it is always wrong, or that there are no real ethical issues about suicide. These views are to be explored, not presupposed. To be sure, the history of reflection on the ethics of suicide will be a continuing history, as cultural conceptions of suicide and related issues like self-sacrifice, heroism, social protest, self-deliverance, martyrdom, and so on in each of these contexts evolve, but, in an increasingly global world in which once-independent traditions interact more and more fully and in the process shape and reshape each other, it is important to be able to view the deeper roots of these issues.

Margaret Pabst Battin
Salt Lake City, Utah, 2015

Notes on the Preparation of this Edition

In a project of this scope, comprehensiveness must be balanced with selectiveness, and significance assessed in various ways. The texts themselves are drawn as much as possible from original sources. The print volume from Oxford University Press necessarily involves disciplined, even draconian editing; fuller versions of many of these texts are available in the Digital Archive for this volume hosted by the University of Utah J. Willard Marriott Library at <http://ethicsofsuicide.lib.utah.edu>. Some selections are available in the Digital Archive only, and are so indicated in the table of contents and the introductory material for each author or cultural group. Except where otherwise indicated, material in the general introduction, in the author-specific biographical introductions, and in the source references covers both the excerpted texts in the print volume and the full-length selections in the Digital Archive. In general, the biographical material is drawn from and cross-confirmed with the principal general and specialized encyclopedic and reference works in the relevant fields, reviewed and revised in collaboration with the Consulting Editors.

Authorship

Authors of texts included in this collection are identified with dates and modest biographical information. This information varies in degree of detail in approximate relation to the importance of the figure or the text. However, especially for early and for non-Western texts, authorship is sometimes unknown, inexact, or only traditional (e.g., Hippocrates is the traditional, but not actual, author of the Hippocratic Oath; Confucius is the traditional, but not actual, author of *The Book of Filial Piety*). Particular attention is given to authors whose writings on suicide have been central in their own thought and/or influential in subsequent discussion of suicide. The volume attempts to achieve a balance between familiar, ordinary, and sometimes banal things said by significant figures and interesting, original things said by obscure figures. Given a particular way of thinking about suicide, *who* thinks it is, in some cases, as important as *what* is thought.

Chronology and Dating of Sources

Sources are entered in the chronological listings of this collection by the birthdate of the author or, when there is no identifiable author, the date of the text. Some exceptions are made, and chronological ordering—though for the most part effective—does present some challenges, particularly with older or non-Western texts. For example, chronological presentation of texts by the author's birthdate does not always reflect the chronology of the composition of the texts or the chronology of the author's influence on surrounding or subsequent discussion. While traditions such as Judaism and Buddhism are entered by the approximate dates of the earliest written texts, these dates are often extremely inexact. Birthdates are unclear or unknown for some figures (among others, Ignatius of Antioch and Ibn Fadlan); in these cases, chronological listing is by assumed approximate birthdate. Later texts within a tradition that has developed over an extended period are sometimes accumulated under an earlier entry if directly contiguous in content to it; this is true of Jainism and with some of the Talmudic commentaries. When there are discrepancies between traditional dates and historically documented dates, courtesy to a tradition has sometimes prevailed (e.g., the date 632 A.D. [the date of Muhammad's death] is the date traditionally

cited as the beginning of Islam, although scholarly evidence suggests that the earliest material for the Quran and for Muhammad's autobiography is no earlier than the 690s, and Islam does not emerge as a full theological and legal tradition until the 800s).

Within groupings of oral cultures, which are generally classified by region, cultural or tribal identity, or language group, the assignment of dates in an ongoing chronology is even more problematic. Although the grouping itself is entered in the overall chronology by the date of the earliest text, within a grouping the texts are sometimes arranged by content, often so that myth-related material is first, then descriptions of "the old-ways," followed by descriptions of then-current practices. The dating of these texts does not necessarily reflect the beginnings or development of particular practices, or beliefs within a group; rather, they reflect the date of recorded contact with outside observers.

Identification and Nomenclature

Identification of sources and authors in the Western, largely European tradition is generally unproblematic. However, for non-Western texts and reports from traditional oral cultures, identification and groupings of texts are made in a variety of ways. Many different systems are in use: Oceanic cultures are usually labeled geographically (by the name of the island or by the name of the people); early European cultures by ethnicity (e.g., Viking); sub-Saharan African cultures by language group; and Central and South American cultures by political society (Aztec, Maya, Inca). In some cases, early ethnographic research has been done in ways that reflect ethnic or linguistic distinctions that, in light of modern findings about genetic relationships among peoples or linguistic changes, are no longer tenable. In general, the identification of groups in this volume seeks to achieve balance among familiarity of conventional ways of identifying cultures, respect for preferences of current members of those cultures about identifying labels, and consistency among cultures. In general, a group's currently preferred name is used as a heading (e.g., Inuit), while usage of the source texts (e.g., Eskimo) is retained in the sources themselves.

Nomenclatures, both popular and scientific, are often confusing and change over time. For example, all of the following have been used to name Western hemisphere groups: Indians, New World Indians, indigenous peoples, First Peoples, First Nations, Native Americans, MesoAmericans, and Amerindians. Although there are some differences among the meanings of these terms, they are frequently used interchangeably; the practice in this volume is to try to minimize confusion. Nomenclature may also differ as a function of religious identity. For example, a body of text originating in the Middle East from the 12th through the 9th century B.C. and on, though scriptural for all three of the major monotheist religious groups, is called "The Bible," "The Hebrew Bible," or (for its first five books) "The Pentateuch" by Jews; "The Old Testament" by Catholics (this label includes the Apocrypha), and "The Old Testament and Apocrypha" by Protestants. In general, the treatment of religious texts in this collection employs the names used by originating groups.

Finally, not only does this volume seek to avoid crude generalizations about cultures and to recognize that the various members of a culture may exhibit a wide range of individual views, but it also recognizes that the ways in which various cultures and individuals within them refer to each other and to each others' beliefs and practices are at times not generous; such prejudices are sometimes evident in the texts. This collection does not wish to perpetuate such conventions but nevertheless seeks to portray accurately what these sources sought to convey.

Treatment of Texts

For the most part, this collection uses the original titles of sources throughout, though descriptive titles are also sometimes supplied to augment the original or provide identification in the absence

of a specific section title. Spelling and capitalization have been for the most part modernized, and diacritical marks for the most part omitted. The textual apparatus in scholarly editions has been omitted, though crucial terms are inserted in brackets in the text. In the print version of this volume, footnotes are held to an absolute minimum and are routinely deleted without specific acknowledgement; some are interpolated into the texts. Chapter and section numbers (for older texts, often added by later editors) have for the most part been removed. Numbering of texts is used only within oral-tradition groups, primarily because these groupings involve a large number of often small selections. However, for most selections, full original texts are available online in this volume's Digital Archive, and in the source or sources cited at the end of the text. The Digital Archive, hosted by the University of Utah at http://ethicsofsuicide.lib.utah.edu/ and accessible from this text via the QR codes at the beginning of each selection, also provides information about other libraries with holdings of these materials. The Digital Archive is fully searchable.

For texts in translation, most titles have been translated as well, though in some cases, reference to the original title is also made, typically when the work is well known in that way. Where translations have retained some original terms, these are for the most part deleted. Because transliteration from other languages to English may follow a variety of systems (for example, the name of the 4th-century B.C. Chinese poet would be, in Wade-Giles, "Ch'ü Yüan"; in Pinyin, "Qu Yuan"). Because texts may be drawn from different sources using different systems, transliterated names and terms may not be consistent within a tradition.

Severe discipline has been exercised in editing for the print volume, and it has been necessary to exclude much. Omissions, deletions, and the extent of ellipses marked in a text can be determined from the page references given in source notes. Furthermore, the material that appears in the print collection is sometimes part of a much longer discussion and/or has analogues in other works by the same author. Because the editing of sources is so severe and necessarily excludes much of the text's environment and context, readers are urged to consult the full texts in the Digital Archive—quick access is provided by the QR codes—and indeed the complete works of the authors in whom they are interested.

Invitation to Submit Further Selections, Corrections, and Comments

Readers of this volume are invited to submit corrections, comments, and further texts for inclusion in the Digital Archive. See the QR codes on the frontispage. Please send a note of inquiry to the Archive Librarian, at allyson.mower@utah.edu or through the tab on the home page of the Digital Archive.

For Help Concerning Suicide

Some of the material in this collection may prove disturbing. For help with thoughts of suicide or impulses to harm oneself, contact the American Association of Suicidology and/or the International Association for Suicide Prevention. In the U.S., the national crisis hotline number is 800-273-TALK (8255). Similar services and suicide prevention lifelines are available in many other countries.

An earlier version of this essay, framed as a hypothetical project, appears in Margaret Pabst Battin, *Ending Life: Ethics and the Way We Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 163–174.

Selections

Suicide is an event of human nature which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew.

—Goethe, *Truth and Poetry: From my Own Life*

EGYPTIAN DIDACTIC TALE (c. 1937–1759 B.C.)

from *Dialogue of a Man With His Soul* (expanded in Archive)

The didactic tale "Dialogue of a Man With His Soul," also referred to as "A Debate Between a Man Tired of Life and His Soul" or "A Dispute over Suicide," is believed to have been composed sometime during the 12th Dynasty (1937–1759 B.C.) of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt (2040–1759 B.C.), probably toward its end. The only copy of the papyrus scroll that survived is incomplete: the beginning of the text is missing and numerous lacunae make this text very difficult to translate, inviting sharp differences in interpretation. While scholars do not agree about the overall meaning of this masterpiece of the Egyptian literature, almost all, if not all, do agree that a man is tired of his life and is expressing his wish to go to the West, to the afterlife. His ba, most commonly translated as "soul," is not willing to help him.

The Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 B.C.) had been under tight control by the pharaohs of the Fourth through the Sixth Dynasties and had seen Egypt reach the height of its material wealth and intellectual powers; earthly success and wealth were emphasized in its pragmatic, materialistic culture, and immortality could be assured with an imposing tomb, an ample mortuary endowment, the momentum of earthly success, and the favor of the divine king, the pharaoh. During that period, Egypt was subject to neither external threats from other groups nor internal instability, although after the end of the Fourth Dynasty the royal power had been gradually becoming more earthly than divine. However, with the death of Pepi II of the Sixth Dynasty, sometime around 2180—after what tradition claims was a 90-year reign—the Old Kingdom had begun to crumble, giving way to the anarchy of feuding warlords, ubiquitous violence, foreign incursion by displaced Asiatics (a focus of blame at the time), and above all intense internal strains. Responsible government had collapsed, and even the pyramids had been robbed of property belonging to the dead. Following this collapse, the First Intermediate Period had been an era of sudden and extreme disruption, its literature voicing bewilderment and despair as the stability of the Egyptian world was being overturned. This First Intermediate Period lasted until Egypt was reunited in the Eleventh Dynasty, about 2040 B.C. Whether the "Dialogue of a Man With His Soul," stemming from the following dynasty, still reflects political anguish or is a largely personal document is not clear, but it does explore a way to escape troubles: ending one's life.

In often obscure language, the Dialogue portrays an argument between a man and his ba*; the beginning of the manuscript is lost, and the remaining portion of the dialogue opens with the man answering his soul. Plagued by misfortune, the man seems to contemplate suicide by fire. His* ba*, or soul, an essential element that would permeate the reanimation of the man's living existence* (akh) *in another world through uniting with* ka *("second self") after the death of the physical body* (khat)*, tries to dissuade the man. Since the concept of the* ba *itself is heavily disputed by Egyptologists, it is not very clear whether the man's* ba *has already moved on to the West (as a separate non-physical element of its owner) or is still with the man. But it is clear what the* ba *fears: that if the man commits suicide as he seems to be planning, there will be no dwelling place left for it. Death by fire would mean that there could be no mummification, burial, tomb, or mortuary service. Egyptian belief held that only when a body was embalmed, given appropriate burial rites, and supplied with offerings for nourishment and other needs could its soul live on in the West, the land of the dead, and that the soul*

must return every night to its "house" in order to be renewed and reborn the following morning at sunrise. Thus to live eternally, the preservation of the corpse was essential.

The man, though, assures his soul that if it agrees, proper burial arrangements will be made. But the soul, concerned that these promises will soon be forgotten, says that his lot will be no better than that of a poor man, and suggests, instead of suicide, a life of wanton pleasure—perhaps a response to the political unrest that had been proposed in texts of the earlier First Intermediate Period.

The man replies with a four-part argument: (1) his name will be in evil odor if he follows the soul's advice to adopt a life of pleasure; (2) the people of his day are wicked, goodness is rejected everywhere, and he has no true friend; (3) death will be welcome; and (4) the dead are among the gods. The soul, apparently convinced by this argument, says that whether the man chooses to remain alive or to commit suicide, it will remain with him, and that they "shall make a home together."

John A. Wilson describes this text as "thoroughly un-Egyptian in spirit," insofar as it abandons life and embraces death, gives up the customary funerary ceremony and psychology, and accords the individual the liberty to question the existing order. However, he acknowledges, the language of the text and its conception of the ba *are purely Egyptian; the problem is that the text belongs to an atypical period of pessimism that is itself not characteristic of Egyptian culture or history.*

Sources

"A Dispute Over Suicide" from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, tr. John A. Wilson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950. Descriptive material in introduction from John A. Wilson, *The Burden of Egypt*, republished as *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1956); Ahmed Okasha and Farouk Lotaief, "Egypt," in Lee A. Headley, *Suicide in Asia and the Near East* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), p. 335; and from Ewa Wasilewska.

DIALOGUE OF A MAN WITH HIS SOUL

I opened my mouth to my soul, that I might answer what it had said: "This is too much for me today, that my soul no (longer) talks with me. It is really too great to be exaggerated. It is like *abandoning* me. Let [*not*] my soul go away; it should wait for me because of. . . . There is no competent person who deserts on the day of misfortune. Behold, my soul wrongs me, (but) I do not listen to it, dragging myself toward death before I come to it and casting (myself) upon the fire to burn myself up. . . . May it be near to me on the day of misfortune and wait on that side. . . . My soul is stupid to (try to) *win over* one wretched over life and *delay* me from death before I come to it. Make the West pleasant for me! Is that (so) bad? Life is a circumscribed period: (even) the trees must fall. Trample down wrongs—(yet) my wretchedness endures. Let Thoth, who propitiates the gods, judge me. Let Khonsu, the scribe in truth, defend me. Let Re, who *pilots* the sun barque, hear my speech. Let Isdes . . . defend me. My wretchedness is heavy. . . . Pleasant would be the defense of a god for the secrets of my body."

What my soul said to me: "Art thou not a man? Art thou . . . whilst thou livest? What is thy goal? Thou art concerned with [*burial*] like a possessor of wealth!"

I said: "I have not departed as long as these things *are neglected*. He who *carries (men) off forcibly* will take, without caring about thee, (like) any *criminal* saying: 'I shall carry thee off, for

thy (fate) is still death, (though) thy name may live.' (But) yonder is a place for settling down, the *guide* of the heart; the West is home. . . . If my soul will listen to me, an *in*[*noc*]*ent* man, and its heart agrees with me, it will be fortunate. (Then) I shall make it reach the West like one who is in his pyramid, at whose burial a survivor has stood. I shall make a *shelter [over]* thy corpse, (so that) thou mayest *scorn* another soul as inert. I shall make a *shelter*—now it must not be (too) cool—(so that) thou mayest *scorn* another soul which is (too) hot. I shall drink at the watering place and shall . . ., (so that) thou mayest *scorn* another soul which is hungry. If thou delayest me from a death of this fashion, thou wilt not find a place where thou canst settle down in the West. (So) be [patient], my soul and my brother, until my heir has appeared, he who will make offerings and will stand at the grave on the day of burial, so that he may *prepare* the bed of the cemetery."

My soul opened its mouth to me, that it might answer what I had said: "If thou art thinking of burial, that is heart's distress. It is a bringing of tears, making a man sad. It is taking a man out of his house, (so that) he is left on the hillside, (whence) thou shalt never go up above that thou mightest see the suns. They who build in granite and who hew out *chambers* in a pyramid, good men in good work, as soon as the builders have become gods, their offering-stones are as bare, for lack of a survivor, as (those of) the weary ones, the dead on the dyke—the waters take hold of an end of him, and the sunlight as well, and the fish of the water-banks talk to them. Listen to me. Behold, it is good for men to listen. Pursue the happy day and forget care!

"The poor man plows his plot of ground and loads his harvest into a ship's hold. He makes the journey by towing (the boat), (because) his feast day is approaching. When he sees the forthcoming of an evening of *high water*, he is vigilant in the ship when Re retires, (and so) comes out (safely), with his wife. (But) his children are lost on the lake, *treacherous* with crocodiles in the night. At last he sits down, when he *can take part* in speech, saying: 'I am not weeping for that girl, (although) there is no coming forth from the West for her, for another (*time*) on earth. (But) I am concerned about her (unborn) children, broken in the egg, who saw the face of the crocodile-god before they had (even) lived!'

"The poor man asks for an afternoon meal, (but) his wife says to him: 'It's for supper!' He goes out-of-doors to *grumble* for a while. If he comes back into the house and is like another man, his wife is (still) experienced in him: that he does not listen to her (but) *grumbles*, unresponsive to communications." I opened my mouth to my soul, that I might answer what it had said:

Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than the stench of bird-droppings
On summer days, when the sky is hot.
Behold, my name will reek through thee
*(More than) a fish-*handler
On the day of the catch, when the sky is hot.
Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than the stench of bird-droppings,
More than a covert *of reeds with waterfowl.*
Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than the stench of fisherman,
More than the stagnant pools *which they have fished.*
Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than the stench of crocodiles,
More than sitting in the assembly among *the crocodiles.*

Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than a (married) woman
Against whom a lie has been told because of a man.
Behold, my name will reek through thee
More than a sturdy boy of whom it is said:
"He belongs to his rival*!"*
Behold, my name will reek through thee
(More than) a treacherous *town, which plots rebellion,*
Of which (only) the outside *can be seen.*

***

To whom can I speak today?
Hearts are rapacious;
No man has a heart upon which one may rely.
To whom can I speak today?
There are no righteous;
The land is left to those who do wrong.
To whom can I speak today?
There is lack of an intimate (friend);
One has recourse to an unknown to complain to him.
To whom can I speak today?
There is no one contented of heart;
That man with whom one went, he no (longer) exists.
To whom can I speak today?
I am laden with wretchedness
For lack of an intimate (friend).
To whom can I speak today?
The sin which treads the earth,
It has no end.

Death is in my sight today
(Like) the recovery of a sick man,
Like going out into the open after a confinement.
Death is in my sight today
Like the odor of myrrh
Like sitting under an awning on a breezy day.
Death is in my sight today
Like the odor of lotus blossoms,
Like sitting on the bank of drunkenness.
Death is in my sight today
Like the passing away *of rain,*
Like the return of men to their houses from an expedition.
Death is in my sight today
Like the clearing of the sky,
Like a man fowling thereby *for what he knew not.*
Death is in my sight today

Like the longing of a man to see his house (again),
After he has spent many years held in captivity.

Why surely, he who is yonder
Will be a living god,
Punishing a sin of him who commits it.
Why surely, he who is yonder
Will stand in the barque of the sun,
Causing that the choicest (offerings) therein be given to the temples.
Why surely, he who is yonder
Will be a man of wisdom,
Not hindered from appealing to Re when he speaks.

What my soul said to me: "Set mourning *aside*, thou who belongest to me, my brother! (Although) thou be offered up on the brazier, (still) thou shalt cling to life, as thou sayest. Whether it be desirable that I (remain) here (because) thou hast rejected the West, or whether it be desirable that thou reach the West and thy body join the earth, I shall come to rest after thou hast relaxed (in death). Thus we shall make a home together."

It has come (to its end), its beginning to its end, as found in writing.

THE VEDAS, UPANISHADS, AND PURANAS (c. 1500–c. 500 B.C.)

Rigveda
Chandogya Upanishad
Isha Upanishad
Brahma Purana
Padma Purana
Skanda Purana
Jabala Upanishad

The Vedic period in Indian thought, which saw the emergence of the Sanskrit hymns known as the Vedas, began around 1200 B.C. during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age in the region of northern India ranging from the upper Indus valley to the lower Ganges and from the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhya Mountains. Vedic thought continued through a middle phase involving the composition of the interpretive Brahmanas and Upanishads, the latter largely philosophical dialogues, followed by the later Puranas, which began to be composed about 350 A.D. and continued to about 1500 A.D.

The four Vedas—the Rigveda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, *and* Atharva Veda—*consist of some 1,028 hymns in Vedic Sanskrit, composed over several centuries by poets in various priestly groups. They are metrical hymns dedicated to specific deities for recitation or chanting in connection with religious sacrifice, and are considered* shruti *("what is heard"), that is, directly*

revealed, as distinct from texts that are smriti *("what is remembered"), that is, of human origin. The oldest of Hindu scriptures, the Vedas were originally passed down orally with exquisite precision, and continued to be transmitted orally long after Vedic culture employed writing for other purposes.*

Attached to specific Vedas are additional expository and interpretive texts, the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads. The Brahmanas are largely prose works, intended to interpret and explore the meaning of the Vedas.

The Upanishads focus on ritualistic worship and on knowledge of Brahman. There are more than 200 Upanishads, comprising ten principal works: the Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, *and* Brihadaranyaka *Upanishads. Because the Upanishads arose during a period of social, economic, and religious change, as Patrick Olivelle observes, they also display the emergence of central religious concepts in both Hinduism and in the new religious movements of the time, Buddhism and Jainism: such concepts as the doctrine of rebirth, the law of* karma *that regulates rebirth, techniques of liberation from rebirth, the disciplines of yoga, ascetic self-denial and mortification, and the renunciation of sex, wealth, and family life. It is the Upanishads, viewed by many scholars as the pinnacle of early and classical Hindu literature, that continue to play a role of particularly great influence in Hinduism; they have been of central importance in Indian religion, philosophy, and culture for almost three millennia. Heterodox traditions later developing from these roots include the Jain and Buddhist traditions.*

The Rigveda, probably complete by about 900 B.C., *provides what some scholars regard as the earliest mention of sati, the practice of self-immolation by a wife on her husband's funeral pyre. The passage seems to describe a ritual practice in which the new widow lies on the pyre beside her husband's corpse, but then, apparently, retires before the pyre is set alight. It is not known whether this is the vestige of an older custom involving actual live cremation of the widow, or a gesture symbolizing the end of a marriage. Nor is it known whether it was originally restricted to nobility or the higher castes, a privilege for the wives of nobles and kings. In this text, sati is clearly viewed as a privilege of the virtuous wife. In a much later period of Hindu thought, the Brahma Purana speaks of sati, but casts it as an obligation or duty.*

The Chandogya *Upanishad is one of the earliest of the Upanishads in date of composition; it is pre-Buddhist, and probably dates from the 7th or 6th century* B.C. *In the passages presented here it expresses what appears to be dedication to living a "full length of life," as does the* Isha *Upanishad: "One may desire to live a hundred years."*

The Isha Upanishad (also called the Ishavasya Upanishad or the Samhita Upanishad) is normally placed first in collections of the Upanishads, though it is not the oldest; it probably dates from the last few centuries B.C. *It is one of the shortest of all the Upanishads. The poem also focuses on those who "kill the self," explicit in the third stanza. This phrase has many possible interpretations—variously supported by different scholars—ranging from extreme self-abnegation, to destruction of the bodily self, to destruction of the spiritual self by material concerns. The Isha Upanishad also contains highly negative judgments of suicide in the conventional sense: those who commit suicide are condemned to an extremely harsh afterlife. In seeming contrast, according to S. Radhakrishnan, the Jabala Upanishad seems to justify suicide, in certain conditions.*

Throughout the Sanskrit literature the term aatma hatya, *or "killing (or murder) of the soul," is used for suicide; it remains the term for suicide in modern Hindi. There is an ongoing debate as to whether in the ancient texts* aatma hatya *refers to literal, physical, or spiritual suicide, as in certain yogic practices that are held to separate the soul from the body—especially stopping the action of thinking.*

On the other hand, the Sanskrit literature also includes references to circumstances under which it is not sinful for a Hindu to commit suicide in the physical sense. Some texts in the Sanskrit literature also distinguish between akaal mrityu, *"untimely death," an inauspicious death also including accidents and murder, as well as suicide, and* kaal mrityu, *"timely death," a good death. Suicide is not automatically "untimely," as death in specific circumstances—e.g., in the city of Varanasi (Skanda Purana) or drowning in the Ganges (Padma Purana). Expiational suicide is also the only way to atone for the murder of a Brahmin or other serious sins. In general, observes Karin Andriolo, suicide is accepted as renunciation, when approaching enlightenment; you do not lay hands on yourself but rather let nature take its course with you: you go into the water and drown, or fall from a cliff, or walk into the mountains and freeze. This distinction remains active in Hindu thought today.*

See also Rammohun Roy's [q.v.] "Translation of a Conference Between an Advocate For, and an Opponent Of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive" for an extensive debate concerning the significance of early Hindu scriptural texts.

Sources

Rig Veda X.18.7, ed. Kane, pp. 199–200; Brahma Purana 80.75; Chandogya Upanishad and Jabala Upanishad 5, in S. Radhakrishnan, ed. and tr., *The Principal Upanishads*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1994, pp. 510–511, 898–899. Isa Upanishad, in *Upanishads*, tr. Patrick Olivelle. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996. Quotation in introduction from Patrick Olivelle, tr., *Upanishads*. Oxford, UK, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, see esp. introduction. Material in introduction also from Wendy Doniger, The Hindus: An Alternative History (New York: Penguin, 2009), F. Max Müller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 1, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1879; Karin R. Andriolo, "Solemn departures and blundering escapes: traditional attitudes toward suicide in India," International Journal of Indian Studies 3, 1 (1993):1–68, and personal communications from Karin Andriolo and Christine Everaert.

RIGVEDA X.18.7-8

Let these women, whose husbands are worthy and are living, enter the house with ghee (applied) as corrylium (to their eyes). Let these wives first step into the pyre, tearless without any affliction and well adorned. Rise up, woman, into the world of the living. Come here; you are lying beside a man whose life's breath has gone. You were the wife of this man who took your hand and desired to have you.

CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD

Fourteenth Khanda

The individual soul identical with the infinite Brahma

1. Verily, this whole world is Brahma. Tranquil, let one worship It as that from which he came forth, as that into which he will be dissolved, as that in which he breathes.
   Now, verily, a person consists of purpose (*kratu-maya*). According to the purpose which a person has in this world, thus does he become on departing hence. So let him form for himself a purpose.
2. He who consists of mind, whose body is life (*prana*), whose form is light, whose conception is truth, whose soul (*atman*) is space, containing all works, containing all desires, containing all odors, containing all tastes, encompassing this whole world, the unspeaking, the

concerned—[3] this Soul of mine within the heart is smaller than a grain of rice, or a barley-corn, or a mustard-seed, or a grain of millet, or the kernel of a grain of millet; this Soul of mine within the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than these worlds.

4. Containing all works, containing all desires, containing all odors, containing all tastes, encompassing this whole world, the unspeaking, the concerned—this is the Soul of mine within the heart, this is Brahma. Into him I shall enter on departing hence.
   If one would believe this, he would have no more doubt.—Thus used Sandilya to say—yea, Sandilya!

Sixteenth Khanda

A person's entire life symbolically a Soma-sacrifice

1. Verily, a person is a sacrifice. His [first] twenty-four years are the morning Soma-libation, for the Gayatri meter has twenty-four syllables and the morning Soma-libation is offered with Gayatri hymn. The Vasus are connected with this part of the sacrifice. Verily, the vital breaths (*prana*) are the Vasus, for they cause everything here to continue (*vas*).
2. If any sickness should overtake him in this period of life, let him say: 'Ye vital breaths, ye Vasus, let this morning libation of mine continue over to the mid-day libation. Let not me, the sacrifice, be broken off in the midst of the vital breaths, of the Vasus.' He arises from it; he becomes free from sickness.
3. Now the [next] forty-four years are the mid-day libation, for the Trishtubh meter has forty-four syllables and the mid-day libation is offered with a Trishtubh hymn. The Rudras are connected with this part of the sacrifice. Verily, the vital breaths are the Rudras, for [on departing] they cause everything here to lament (*rud*).
4. If any sickness should overtake him in this period of life, let him say: 'Ye vital breaths, ye Rudras, let this mid-day libation of mine continue over to the third libation. Let not me, the sacrifice, be broken off in the midst of the vital breaths, of the Rudras.' He arises from it; he becomes free from sickness.
5. Now, the [next] forty-eight years are the third libation, for the Jagati meter has forty-eight syllables and the third libation is offered with a Jagati hymn. The Adityas are connected with this part of the sacrifice. Verily, the vital breaths are the Adityas, for [on departing] they take everything to themselves (*adadate*).
6. If any sickness should overtake him in this period of life, let him say: 'Ye vital breaths, ye Adityas, let this third libation of mine continue to a full length of life. Let not me, the sacrifice, be broken off in the midst of the vital breaths, of the Adityas.' He arises from it; he becomes free from sickness.
7. Verily, it was this that Mahidasa Aitareya knew when he used to say: 'Here, why do you afflict me with this sickness—me, who am not going to die with it?' He lived a hundred and sixteen years. He lives to a hundred and sixteen years who knows this.

ISHA UPANISHAD

Recognition of the unity underlying the diversity of the world

1. By the Lord (*isa*) enveloped must this all be—
   Whatever moving thing there is in the moving world.

With this renounced, though mayest enjoy.
Covet not the wealth of anyone at all.

Non-attachment of deeds on the person of a renouncer

2. Even while doing deeds here,
One may desire to live a hundred years.
Thus on thee—not other than this is it—
The deed (*karman*) adheres not on the man.

The forbidding future for slayers of the Self

3. Devilish (*asurya*) are those worlds called,
With blind darkness (*tamas*) covered o'er!
Unto them, on deceasing, go
Whatever folk are slayers of the Self . . .

A dying person's prayer

15. With a golden vessel
The Real's face is covered o'er.
That do though, O Pushan, uncover
For one whose law is the Real to see.
16. O Nourisher (*pusan*), the sole Seer (*ekarsi*), O Controller (*yama*), O Sun (*surya*), offspring of Prajapati, spread forth they rays! Gather thy brilliance (*tejas*)! What is they fairest form—that of thee I see. He who is yonder, yonder Person (*purusa*)—I myself am he!
17. [My] breath (*vayu*) to the immortal wind (*anila*)!
This body then ends in ashes! *Om*!
O Purpose (*kratu*), remember! The deed (*krta*) remember!
O Purpose, remember! The deed remember!

JABALA UPANISHAD

The Atri enquired of Yajnavalkya. On being asked how one who does not wear the sacred thread can be (treated as) a Brahmana, Yajnavalkya answered, this alone is the sacred thread of him that purifies himself by the offering and sipping water. This is the procedure for becoming a recluse. (For one who is weary of the world but not yet fit to become a recluse the following are prescribed), he may choose a hero's death (by following he path of the warrior in the battlefield), he may fast unto death, throw himself into water or enter fire (burn himself to death) or perform the last journey (walk on unto death). Then the wandering ascetic who (puts on) orange robes, who is shaven, who has non-possession, purity, non-enmity, lives on alms, obtains the state of Brahman. If he is diseased he can renounce by mind and speech. This is not to be done by one who is healthy. Such a renouncer becomes the knower of Brahman, so said the venerable Yajnavalkya.

BRAHMA PURANA 80.75

It is the highest duty of the woman to immolate herself after her husband.

PADMA PURANA V.60.55

A man who, knowingly or unknowingly, willfully or unintentionally dies in the Ganges, secures on death heaven and moksha [release from the cycle of rebirth].

SKANDA PURANA VI.22.76

He who dies in Kashi [Varanasi] does not incur the sin of suicide but secures his desired objects.

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND APOCRYPHA (c. 12th–1st centuries B.C.)

Genesis: The Prohibition of Bloodshed
Exodus: The Ten Commandments ***(expanded in Archive)***
Judges: Samson and the Philistines
I Samuel–II Samuel: Saul and his Armor-Bearer
Job: The Sufferings of Job
Daniel: Shadrach, Meschach, Abednego and the Fiery Furnace ***(in Archive only)***
II Maccabees: The Suicide of Razis ***(in Archive only)***

The collection of texts originating among the Hebrews of the first millennium B.C., *the Hebrew Bible, generally referred to as the* Tanakh *by Jews and as the Old Testament by Christians, is a compilation recognized as scriptural in both traditions. It is complex in textual history. Written in classical Hebrew (except for some brief portions in a cognate language, Aramaic), it includes material believed to have been transmitted orally, as well as in written form, spanning over a thousand years of history from the 12th through the 1st century* B.C. *No original manuscripts from the earliest period have survived, though the Qumran manuscripts of some sections, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, date from as early as the 1st century* B.C. *After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70* A.D., *Jewish religious leaders compiled a comprehensive text from those manuscripts that survived the destruction; the earliest surviving manuscripts of this Bible date from the 9th century* A.D.

The oldest sections of the Hebrew Bible, the "five books of Moses" or Pentateuch, *comprising the Torah in the strict sense, are the five books from Genesis through Deuteronomy. These books, from which the first two selections here are taken, provide among other things the Hebrews' origin accounts. The Deuteronomic histories (the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), which chronicle Hebrew history, are the source of the second two selections. A selection is also included from the Book of Job, framed around a central poetic dialogue, probably written around the time of the Persian Conquest and the Jewish Exile of the 6th century* B.C. *Also included is a passage from one of the Apocrypha: II Maccabees. The Apocrypha are books and portions of books written in Hebrew or Greek in the second and first centuries* B.C., *ultimately rejected as canonical by later Jewish authorities but preserved in Christian textual collections and whose inclusion in the Old Testament canon was disputed by Christian thinkers. While II Maccabees is not recognized as part of the Hebrew Bible by Jews or as part of the Old Testament by Protestant Christians, it is recognized as scriptural and part of the Old Testament by Catholics and Orthodox Christians.*

Within the older material of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, two kinds of text bear on the issue of suicide: statements or imperatives held to define the morality of suicide, and accounts of specific instances of suicide. Of the first kind are Genesis 9:5, "for your lifeblood I will demand satisfaction," now often said to be the basis on which Judaism's prohibition of suicide is grounded, and Exodus 20:13, "thou shalt not kill" (or, in the New English Bible translation used here, "Do not commit murder"), the principal basis of Christianity's prohibition. Christian authors do not typically appeal to Genesis 9:5 as the basis of the prohibition, nor do Jewish authors typically appeal to Exodus 20:13, though both texts are scriptural for both traditions. Of the second kind are the six instances of suicide narrated in the Hebrew Bible proper, as well as two in the Apocrypha: Abimelech (Judges 9:54); Samson (Judges 16:23-32); Saul and his armor bearer (the story runs continuously from I Samuel 31:4 through II Samuel 1:6, and is also related in I Chronicles 10:4); Ahithophel (II Samuel 17:23); Zimri (I Kings 16:18); Razis (II Maccabees 14:41); and Ptolemy Macron (II Maccabees 10:13). These narratives neither moralize about suicide nor express any explicit prohibition of self-killing. Job provides a negative instance of suicide, in which it is not undertaken despite a strong wish for death and a wife's urging, and the Book of Daniel's account of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego as they are thrown into the fiery furnace has served in the Jewish tradition as a paradigm of martyrdom to avoid apostasy (generally distinguished from suicide).

These texts pose numerous interpretive challenges. The plain meaning of the selection from Genesis does not explicitly address suicide per se. The explanation of how it has come to serve as the basis of Judaism's prohibition of suicide involves what Noam Zohar calls "creative midrashic interpretation—so grammatically fantastic (as is not unusual in midrash) as to hardly merit being called an 'interpretation' at all." Daniel Greenwood, in contrast, disagrees that there is a syntactical problem. But both agree on the conceptual implications: Genesis 9:5 eloquently expresses a basic valuation of human life, easily extended to a new context. As Zohar says, its "proclaim[ation of] the sanctity of human life, created in God's image, and the consequent view of its destruction as amounting to sacrilege . . . provides (far more clearly than a turn of phrase in verse 9:5) the basis for the later midrashic interpretation as prohibiting suicide. . . ." The later interpretation applying the verse to suicide is to be found in Genesis Rabbah [q.v.] and in subsequent texts, including Tosafot [q.v.].

The story of Samson in Judges 16, which may seem to have implications for contemporary discussions of tactical suicide in military and quasi-military situations for subject peoples, is notable for its reference to intention. Samson asks for (and apparently receives) God's assistance in destroying over 3,000 people and killing himself in the process. As in other military cultures, it is unclear whether Samson's own death, whether seen as revenge for his blinding or as self-sacrifice in the cause of military success, is to be classified as a form of suicide.

1 Samuel 31:3 and the beginning of II Samuel present a substantial textual challenge: the phrase rendered here describing Saul as "wounded severely" can also be translated, and perhaps more plausibly, as holding that Saul was "very afraid of the archers." How the passage is translated and how the alternative versions are understood make substantial differences in whether Saul's suicide, or request for euthanasia, the coup de grâce, is to be understood as preemptive, as the hastening of a dying process already underway, as an act of cowardice, or—as David appears to think—murder, indeed regicide.

In the Book of Job—its inquisition modeled, some commentators hold, on the Persian secret service of the post-Conquest period—God permits "the Adversary," Satan, to test Job's renowned piety by imposing hardships on him. Job has had an ample family, extensive property, and good fortune and repute; and so, Satan argues, faith may be easy. With the permission of God, Satan inflicts a series of calamities on Job: his family dies, he loses his property, and he suffers painful physical ailments. The text is excerpted here to highlight not so much Job's remonstration with God, the usual focus of readings of the text, but the strength of Job's wish for death. In later commentaries, Job

stands as the preeminent scriptural figure of endurance: Despite his wish for death as a relief from his unbearable afflictions, and even in spite of his wife's suggestion that he curse God and thereby bring about his own death, he does not kill himself.

The selection from the Book of Daniel relates the story of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, who have been given the foreign names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; it describes how they are thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol. Even though they are miraculously saved in the end, their willingness to die rather than commit apostasy serves as a paradigm of martyrdom for much of later Judaism.

The final selection, recounting the suicide of the Jewish patriot Razis, is taken from the Apocryphal text II Maccabees. This text, said to be an abridgment of a longer historical work by Jason of Cyrene written in Greek that is no longer extant, narrates resistance under the leadership of the priest Matthias and his son Judas Maccabaeus to Hellenization by the Seleucid rulers of Palestine, and the forced introduction of idols and other forms of worship to Judea in general and the Jerusalem temple in particular. The rebellion succeeded, culminating in the rededication of the Temple in 164 B.C. Significant in this episode is Razis's desire, as he faces capture by the enemy, to "die nobly" in otherwise humiliating circumstances, both echoing the legacy of Saul and showing the influence of Roman Stoicism.

Sources

Genesis 9:1–6; Exodus 20:1–22; Judges 15:9–16:31; I Samuel 31:1-II Samuel 1:16; Job 1:1–4:17, 5:6–5:9, 5:17–5:18, 6:1–7:21, 9:32–10:22, 27:1–6, 36:1–12, 37:14–16, 37:19–38:18, 42:1–6; II Maccabees 14:37, *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, eds. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 18, 82–83, 264–266; 310–311; 510–517, 519–520, 534, 543–546, 549–550, 1255–1256. The Book of Daniel, *The New English Bible, with the Apocrypha*, Oxford Study Edition, ed. Samuel Sandmel, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 945–950. Quotations in introduction from Noam Zohar and Daniel J.H. Greenwood.

from THE HEBREW BIBLE/THE OLD TESTAMENT

GENESIS

The Prohibition of Bloodshed

God blessed Noah and his sons; he said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in numbers, and fill the earth. Fear and dread of you will come on all the animals on earth, on all the birds of the air, on everything that moves on the ground, and on all fish in the sea; they are made subject to you. Every creature that lives and moves will be food for you; I give them all to you, as I have given you every green plant. But you must never eat flesh with its life still in it, that is the blood.

And further, for your life-blood I shall demand satisfaction; from every animal I shall require it, and from human beings also I shall require satisfaction for the death of their fellows.

'Anyone who sheds human blood,
for that human being his blood will be shed;

because in the image of God
has God made human beings.'

EXODUS

The Ten Commandments

God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery . . .
Do not commit murder. [Thou shalt not kill.]
. . . THE LORD said to Moses, Say this to the Israelites: You know now that I have spoken from heaven to you.

JUDGES

Samson and the Philistines

. . . Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived by the wadi of Sorek. The lords of the Philistines went up to her and said, 'Cajole him and find out what gives him his great strength, and how we can overpower and bind him and render him helpless. We shall each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.'

Delilah said to Samson, 'Tell me, what gives you your great strength? How could you be bound and made helpless?' 'If I were bound with seven fresh bowstrings not yet dry,' replied Samson, 'then I should become no stronger than any other man.' The lords of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings not yet dry, and she bound him with them. She had men concealed in the inner room, and she cried, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' Thereupon he snapped the bowstrings as a strand of tow snaps at the touch of fire, and his strength was not impaired.

Delilah said to Samson, 'You have made a fool of me and lied to me. Now tell me this time how you can be bound.' He said to her, 'If I were tightly bound with new ropes that have never been used, then I should become no stronger than any other man.'

Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them. Then, with men concealed in the inner room, she cried, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' But he snapped the ropes off his arms like thread.

Delilah said to him, 'You are still making a fool of me, still lying to me. Tell me: how can you be bound?' He said, 'Take the seven loose locks of my hair, weave them into the warp, and drive them tight with the beater; then I shall become no stronger than any other man.' So she lulled him to sleep, wove the seven loose locks of his hair into the warp, drove them tight with the beater, and cried, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' He woke from sleep and pulled away the warp and the loom with it.

She said to him, 'How can you say you love me when you do not confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and have not told me what gives you your great strength.' She so pestered him with these words day after day, pressing him hard and wearying him to death, that he told her the whole secret. 'No razor has touched my head,' he said, 'because I am a Nazirite, consecrated to God from the day of my birth. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me, and I should become no stronger than any other man.'

Delilah realized that he had told her his secret, and she sent word to the lords of the Philistines: 'Come up at once,' she said; 'he has told me his secret.' The lords of the Philistines came, bringing the money with them.

She lulled Samson to sleep on her lap, and then summoned a man to shave the seven locks of his hair. She was now making him helpless. When his strength had left him, she cried, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' He woke from his sleep and thought, 'I will go out as usual and shake myself'; he did not know that the Lord had left him. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. There they bound him with bronze fetters, and he was set to grinding grain in the prison. But his hair, after it had been shaved, began to grow again.

The lords of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice and say, 'Our god has delivered into our hands Samson our enemy.'

The people, when they saw him, praised their god, chanting: 'Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the scourge of our land who piled it with our dead.'

When they grew merry, they said, 'Call Samson, and let him entertain us.' When Samson was summoned from prison, he was a source of entertainment to them. They then stood him between the pillars, and Samson said to the boy who led him by the hand, 'Put me where I can feel the pillars which support the temple, so that I may lean against them.' The temple was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there, and there were about three thousand men and women on the roof watching the entertainment.

Samson cried to the Lord and said, 'Remember me, Lord God, remember me: for this one occasion, God, give me strength, and let me at one stroke be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.' He put his arms round the two central pillars which supported the temple, his right arm round one and his left round the other and, bracing himself, he said, 'Let me die with the Philistines.' Then Samson leaned forward with all his might, and the temple crashed down on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life.

I SAMUEL–II SAMUEL

Saul and his Armour-Bearer

The Philistines engaged Israel in battle, and the Israelites were routed, leaving their dead on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines closely pursued Saul and his sons, and Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, the sons of Saul, were killed. The battle went hard for Saul, and when the archers caught up with him they wounded him severely. He said to his armour-bearer, 'Draw your sword and run me through, so that these uncircumcised brutes may not come and taunt me and make sport of me.' But the armour-bearer refused; he dared not do it. Thereupon Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. So they died together on that day, Saul, his three sons, and his armour-bearer, as well as all his men. When the Israelites in the neighborhood of the valley and of the Jordan saw that the other Israelites had fled and that Saul and his sons had perished, they fled likewise, abandoning their towns; and the Philistines moved in and occupied them.

Next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons lying dead on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped him of his armour; then they sent messengers through the length and breadth of their land to carry the good news to idols and people

alike. They deposited his armour in the temple of Ashtoreth and nailed his body on the wall of Beth-shan. When the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the warriors among them set out and journeyed through the night to recover the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. They brought them back to Jabesh and burned them; they took the bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and for seven days they fasted.

After Saul's death David returned from his victory over the Amalekites and spent two days in Ziklag. On the third day a man came from Saul's camp; his clothes were torn and there was dust on his head. Coming into David's presence he fell to the ground and did obeisance. David asked him where he had come from, and he replied, 'I have escaped from the Israelite camp.' David said, 'What is the news? Tell me.' 'The army has been driven from the field,' he answered, 'many have fallen in battle, and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead.' David said to the young man who brought the news, 'How do you know that Saul and Jonathan are dead?' He answered, 'It so happened that I was on Mount Gilboa and saw Saul leaning on his spear with the chariots and horsemen closing in on him. He turned and, seeing me, called to me. I said, "What is it, sir?" He asked me who I was, and I said, "An Amalekite." He said to me, "Come and stand over me and dispatch me. I still live, but the throes of death have seized me." So I stood over him and dealt him the death blow, for I knew that, stricken as he was, he could not live. Then I took the crown from his head and the armlet from his arm, and I have brought them here to you, my lord.' At that David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept, and they fasted till evening because Saul and Jonathan his son and the army of the Lord and the house of Israel had fallen in battle.

David said to the young man who brought him the news. 'Where do you come from?' and he answered, 'I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite.' 'How is it', said David, 'that you were not afraid to raise your hand to kill the Lord's anointed?' Summoning one of his own young men he ordered him to fall upon the Amalekite. The young man struck him down and he died. David said, 'Your blood be on your own head; for out of your own mouth you condemned yourself by saying, "I killed the Lord's anointed."'

THE BOOK OF JOB

The Sufferings of Job

Prologue

There lived in the land of Uz a man of blameless and upright life named Job, who feared God and set his face against wrongdoing. He had seven sons and three daughters; and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-donkeys, together with a large number of slaves. Thus Job was the greatest man in all the East.

His sons used to meet together and give, each in turn, a banquet in his own house, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. Then, when a round of banquets was over, Job would send for his children and sanctify them, rising early in the morning and sacrificing a whole offering for each of them; for he thought that they might somehow have sinned against God and committed blasphemy in their hearts. This Job did regularly.

The day came when the members of the court of heaven took their places in the presence of the Lord, and the Adversary, Satan, was there among them. The Lord asked him where he had been. 'Ranging over the earth,' said the Adversary, 'from end to end.'

The LORD asked him, 'Have you considered my servant Job? You will find no one like him on earth, a man of blameless and upright life, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing.' 'Has not Job good reason to be godfearing?' answered the Adversary.

'Have you not hedged him round on every side with your protection, him and his family and all his possessions? Whatever he does you bless, and everywhere his herds have increased beyond measure. But just stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and see if he will not curse you to your face.'

'Very well,' said the LORD. 'All that he has is in your power; only the man himself you must not touch.' With that the Adversary left the LORD's presence.

On the day when Job's sons and daughters were eating and drinking in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were grazing near them, when the Sabaeans swooped down and carried them off, after putting the herdsmen to the sword; only I have escaped to bring you the news.'

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived and said, 'God's fire flashed from heaven, striking the sheep and the shepherds and burning them up; only I have escaped to bring you the news.' While he was still speaking, another arrived and said, 'The Chaldaeans, three bands of them, have made a raid on the camels and carried them off, after putting those tending them to the sword; only I have escaped to bring you the news.' While this man was speaking, yet another arrived and said, 'Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking in their eldest brother's house, when suddenly a whirlwind swept across from the desert and struck the four corners of the house, which fell on the young people. They are dead, and only I have escaped to bring you the news.'

At this Job stood up, tore his cloak, shaved his head, and threw himself prostrate on the ground, saying:

'Naked I came from the womb,
naked I shall return whence I came.
The LORD gives and the LORD takes away;
blessed be the name of the LORD.'

Throughout all this Job did not sin, nor did he ascribe any fault to God.

Once again the day came when the members of the court of heaven took their places in the presence of the LORD, and the Adversary was there among them. The LORD enquired where he had been. 'Ranging over the earth,' said the Adversary, 'from end to end.' The LORD asked, 'Have you considered my servant Job? You will find no one like him on earth, a man of blameless and upright life, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing. You incited me to ruin him without cause, but he still holds fast to his integrity.' The Adversary replied, 'Skin for skin! To save himself there is nothing a man will withhold. But just reach out your hand and touch his bones and his flesh, and see if he will not curse you to your face.' The LORD said to the Adversary, 'So be it. He is in your power; only spare his life.'

When the Adversary left the LORD's presence, he afflicted Job with running sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, and Job took a piece of a broken pot to scratch himself as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, 'Why do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God, and die!'

He answered, 'You talk as any impious woman might talk. If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil?' Throughout all this, Job did not utter one sinful word.

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz of Teman, Bildad of Shuah, and Zophar of Naamah, heard of all these calamities which had overtaken him, they set out from their homes, arranging to go and condole with him and comfort him. But when they first saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him; they wept aloud, tore their cloaks, and tossed dust into the air over their heads.

For seven days and seven nights they sat beside him on the ground, and none of them spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Job's complaint to God

After this Job broke his silence and cursed the day of his birth:

Perish the day when I was born, and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived'!
May that day turn to darkness;
may God above not look for it,
nor light of dawn shine on it.
May gloom and deep darkness claim it again;
May cloud smother that day, blackness eclipse its sun.

May blind darkness swallow up that night!
May it not be counted among the days of the year
or reckoned in the cycle of the months.
May that night be barren for ever,
may no cry of joy be heard in it.
Let it be cursed by those whose spells bind the sea monster,
who have the skill to tame Leviathan.
May no star shine out in its twilight;
may it wait for a dawn that never breaks,
and never see the eyelids of the morning,
because it did not shut the doors of the womb that bore me
and keep trouble away from my sight.

Why was I not stillborn,
Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?
Why was I ever laid on my mother's knees
or put to suck at her breasts?
Or why was I not concealed like an untimely birth,
like an infant who never saw the light?
For now I should be lying in the quiet grave,
asleep in death, at rest
with kings and their earthly counselors
who built for themselves cities now laid waste,
or with princes rich in gold
whose houses were replete with silver.

There the wicked chafe no more,
there the tired labourer takes his ease;
the captive too finds peace there,

no slave-driver's voice reaches him;
high and low alike are there,
even the slave, free from his master.
Why should the sufferer be born to see the light?
Why is life given to those who find it so bitter?
They long for death but it does not come,
they seek it more eagerly than hidden treasure.
They are glad when they reach the grave;
when they come to the tomb they exult.
Why should a man be born to wander blindly,
hedged about by God on every side?

Sighing is for me all my food;
groans pour from me in a torrent.
Every terror that haunted me has caught up with me;
what I dreaded has overtaken me.
There is no peace of mind, no quiet for me;
trouble comes, and I have no rest. . . .

. . . Does not every mortal have hard service on earth,
and are not his days like those of a hired labourer,
like those of a slave longing for the shade
or a servant kept waiting for his wages?
So months of futility are my portion,
troubled nights are my lot.
When I lie down, I think,
'When will it be day, that I may rise?'
But the night drags on,
and I do nothing but toss till dawn.
My body is infested with worms,
and scabs cover my skin;
it is cracked and discharging.
My days pass more swiftly than a weaver's shuttle
and come to an end as the thread of life runs out.

Remember that my life is but a breath of wind;
I shall never again see good times.
The eye that now sees me will behold me no more;
under your very eyes I shall vanish.
As a cloud breaks up and disperses,
so no one who goes down to Sheol ever comes back;
he never returns to his house,
and his abode knows him no more.

But I cannot hold my peace;
I shall speak out in my anguish of spirit
and complain in my bitterness of soul.

Am I the monster of the deep, am I the sea serpent,
that you set a watch over me?
When I think that my bed will comfort me,
that sleep will receive my complaint,
you terrify me with dreams
and affright me through visions.
I would rather be choked outright;
death would be better than these sufferings of mine.
I am in despair, I have no desire to live;
let me alone, for my days are but a breath.
What is man, that you make much of him
and turn your thoughts towards him,
only to punish him morning after morning
or to test him every hour of the day?
Will you not look away from me for an instant,
leave me long enough to swallow my spittle?
If I have sinned, what harm can I do you,
you watcher of the human heart?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my offence
and take away my guilt?
For soon I shall lie in the dust of the grave;
you may seek me, but I shall be no more.

God is not as I am, not someone I can challenge,
and say, 'Let us confront one another in court.'
If only there were one to arbitrate between us
and impose his authority on us both,

so that God might take his rod from my back,
and terror of him might not come on me suddenly.
I should then speak out without fear of him,
for I know I am not what I am thought to be.

I am sickened of life . . .
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You granted me life and continuing favour,
and your providence watched over my spirit.
Yet this was the secret purpose of your heart,
and I know what was your intent:
that, if I sinned, you would be watching me
and would not absolve me of my guilt.
If indeed I am wicked, all the worse for me!
If I am upright, I cannot hold up my head;
I am filled with shame and steeped in my affliction.
If I am proud as a lion, you hunt me down

and confront me again with marvelous power;
you renew your onslaught on me,
and with mounting anger against me
bring fresh forces to the attack.

Why did you bring me out of the womb?
Better if I had expired and no one had set eyes on me,
if I had been carried from womb to grave
and were as though I had not been born.
Is not my life short and fleeting?
Let me be, that I may be happy for a moment,
before I depart to a land of gloom,
a land of deepest darkness, never to return,
a land of dense darkness and disorder,
increasing darkness lit by no ray of light.

Then Job resumed his discourse

I swear by the living God, who has denied me justice,
by the Almighty, who has filled me with bitterness,
that so long as there is any life left in me
and the breath of God is in my nostrils,
no untrue word will pass my lips,
nor will my tongue utter any falsehood.
Far be it from me to concede that you are right!
Till I cease to be, I shall not abandon my claim of innocence.
I maintain and shall never give up the rightness of my cause;
so long as I live, I shall not change.

God's answer and Job's submission

Then the Lord answered Job out of the tempest:
Who is this who darkens counsel
with words devoid of knowledge?
Brace yourself and stand up like a man;
I shall put questions to you, and you must answer.
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
Tell me, if you know and understand.
Who fixed its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line over it?
On what do its supporting pillars rest?
Who set its corner-stone in place,
while the morning stars sang in chorus
and the sons of God all shouted for joy?. . .

Who supported the sea at its birth,
when it burst in flood from the womb—
when I wrapped it in a blanket of cloud

and swaddled it in dense fog,
when I established its bounds,
set its barred doors in place,
and said, 'Thus far may you come but no farther;
here your surging waves must halt'?

In all your life have you ever called up the dawn
or assigned the morning its place?
Have you taught it to grasp the fringes of the earth
and shake the Dog-star from the sky;
to bring up the horizon in relief as clay under a seal,
until all things stand out like the folds of a cloak,
when the light of the Dog-star is dimmed
and the stars of the Navigator's Line go out one by one?

Have you gone down to the springs of the sea
or walked in the unfathomable deep?
Have the portals of death been revealed to you?
Have you seen the door-keepers of the place of darkness?
Have you comprehended the vast expanse on the world?
Tell me all this, if you know.

Job answered the Lord

I know that you can do all things
and that no purpose is beyond you.
You ask: Who is this obscuring counsel yet lacking knowledge?
But I have spoken of things
which I have not understood,
things too wonderful for me to know.
Listen, and let me speak. You said:
I shall put questions to you, and you must answer.
I knew of you then only by report,
but now I see you with my own eyes.
Therefore I yield,
repenting in dust and ashes.

Epilogue

When the Lord had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'My anger is aroused against you and your two friends, because, unlike my servant Job, you have not spoken as you ought about me.

Now take seven bulls and seven rams, go to my servant Job and offer a whole-offering for yourselves, and he will intercede for you. I shall surely show him favour by not being harsh with you because you have not spoken as you ought about me, as he has done.'

Then Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and carried out the Lord's command, and the Lord showed favour to Job when he had interceded for his friends.

The Lord restored Job's fortunes, and gave him twice the possessions he had before . . . hereafter Job lived another hundred and forty years; he saw his sons and his grandsons to four generations, and he died at a very great age.

HOMER
(c. 8th century B.C.)

from *The Iliad: The Deaths of Hector and Achilles*

Homer is the traditional name given to the author(s) of the Iliad *and the* Odyssey*, epic poems that were written down in a dialect known as Homeric Greek sometime around the 8th century* B.C. *No certain biographical information about Homer is known today. It is disputed whether Homer was one person, when he lived, and how the oral poems came into their current written form. The* Iliad *and the* Odyssey *represent the height of the ancient Greek oral tradition of epics and other poems that would have originally been circulated and performed by generations of rhapsodes.*

The Iliad, from which this excerpt is drawn, chronicles the Trojan War, a ten-year war fought between the Greek city-states and Troy, traditionally thought to have occurred sometime around the 12th century B.C. *Homer's poem concerns itself with the "wrath" of the great warrior Achilles, who as part of his quarrel with King Agamemnon chooses to abstain from battle and allow the Greek army to be temporarily defeated, with the help of the god Zeus, in the absence of his singular fighting abilities. For Achilles, abstention from battle also means the delay of his own death, prophesied to take place on the battlefield should he decide to fight at Troy. When Achilles does eventually re-enter the war, it is in order to kill the Trojan heir, Hector, in revenge for Hector's slaughter of Achilles' close friend Patroclus.*

As they approach to fight one another, both Achilles and Hector are submitting to the form of death they regard as honorable: Hector to his most likely death at the hands of Achilles, and Achilles to his eventual death at Troy, which, he is told, will take place soon after he kills Hector. At the time portrayed in Book 9, Achilles had revealed his knowledge of the prophecy and expressed his intention to leave Troy immediately, thereby avoiding its fulfillment; by the time of Book 18, Achilles instead wishes to die because he could not save Patroclus, whom he loved "as dearly" as his own life. Achilles is informed that his death is sure to occur should he take his revenge on Hector. Meanwhile, in Book 22, Hector's parents beg him not to sacrifice himself by fighting Achilles alone and instead return to the safety of the city. Hector's concern is with his own honor, however, and guilt for the men who were killed by Achilles on the first night Achilles came for him. Thus, both warriors respectively choose courses of action they know will result in their own deaths. When, with his dying breath, Hector again foretells Achilles' death, Achilles replies that he will accept his fate "whensoever Zeus and the other gods see fit to send it."

Source

Homer, *The Iliad of Homer: rendered into English prose for the use of those who cannot read the original,* tr. Samuel Butler, London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898. Available online

at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0217. Troy is referred to as Ilius and Zeus as Jove in the original translation; other names have been changed from Roman to Greek and minor typographical errors have been repaired

from THE ILIAD

Book 9

Achilles answered, ". . . My life is more to me than all the wealth of Troy while it was yet at peace before the Achaeans went there, or than all the treasure that lies on the stone floor of Apollo's temple beneath the cliffs of Pytho. Cattle and sheep are to be had for harrying, and a man can buy both tripods and horses if he wants them, but when his life has once left him it can neither be bought nor harried back again.

My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall not return alive but my name will live for ever: whereas if I go home my name will die, but it will be long ere death shall take me. To the rest of you, then, I say, 'Go home, for you will not take Troy.' Zeus has held his hand over her to protect her, and her people have taken heart. Go, therefore, as in duty bound, and tell the princes of the Achaeans the message that I have sent them; tell them to find some other plan for the saving of their ships and people, for so long as my displeasure lasts the one that they have now hit upon may not be. As for Phoenix, let him sleep here that he may sail with me in the morning. . . ."

Book 18

[Achilles'] mother went up to him as he lay groaning; she laid her hand upon his head and spoke piteously, saying, "My son, why are you thus weeping? What sorrow has now befallen you? Tell me; hide it not from me. Surely Zeus has granted you the prayer you made him, when you lifted up your hands and besought him that the Achaeans might all of them be pent up at their ships, and rue it bitterly in that you were no longer with them."

Achilles groaned and answered, "Mother, Olympian Zeus has indeed vouchsafed me the fulfillment of my prayer, but what boon is it to me, seeing that my dear comrade Patroclus has fallen—he whom I valued more than all others, and loved as dearly as my own life? I have lost him; aye, and Hector when he had killed him stripped him of the wondrous armor, so glorious to behold, which the gods gave to Peleus when they laid you in the couch of a mortal man. Would that you were still dwelling among the immortal sea-nymphs, and that Peleus had taken to himself some mortal bride. For now you shall have grief infinite by reason of the death of that son whom you can never welcome home—nay, I will not live nor go about among humankind unless Hector fall by my spear, and thus pay me for having slain Patroclus son of Menoetius."

Thetis wept and answered, "Then, my son, is your end near at hand—for your own death awaits you full soon after that of Hector."

Then said Achilles in his great grief, "I would die here and now, in that I could not save my comrade. He has fallen far from home, and in his hour of need my hand was not there to help him. What is there for me? Return to my own land I shall not, and I have brought no saving neither to Patroclus nor to my other comrades of whom so many have been slain by mighty

Hector; I stay here by my ships a bootless burden upon the earth, I, who in fight have no peer among the Achaeans, though in council there are better than I.

Therefore, perish strife both from among gods and men, and anger, wherein even a righteous man will harden his heart—which rises up in the soul of a man like smoke, and the taste thereof is sweeter than drops of honey. Even so has Agamemnon angered me. And yet—so be it, for it is over; I will force my soul into subjection as I needs must; I will go; I will pursue Hector who has slain him whom I loved so dearly, and will then abide my doom when it may please Zeus and the other gods to send it. Even Hercules, the best beloved of Zeus—even he could not escape the hand of death, but fate and Hera's fierce anger laid him low, as I too shall lie when I am dead if a like doom awaits me. Till then I will win fame, and will bid Trojan and Dardanian women wring tears from their tender cheeks with both their hands in the grievousness of their great sorrow; thus shall they know that he who has held aloof so long will hold aloof no longer. Hold me not back, therefore, in the love you bear me, for you shall not move me."

Book 22

Priam raised a cry and beat his head with his hands as he lifted them up and shouted out to his dear son, imploring him to return; but Hector still stayed before the gates, for his heart was set upon doing battle with Achilles. The old man reached out his arms towards him and bade him for pity's sake come within the walls. "Hector," he cried, "my son, stay not to face this man alone and unsupported, or you will meet death at the hands of the son of Peleus, for he is mightier than you. Monster that he is; would indeed that the gods loved him no better than I do, for so, dogs and vultures would soon devour him as he lay stretched on earth, and a load of grief would be lifted from my heart, for many a brave son has he reft from me, either by killing them or selling them away in the islands that are beyond the sea: even now I miss two sons from among the Trojans who have thronged within the city, Lycaon and Polydorus, whom Laothoë peerless among women bore me. Should they be still alive and in the hands of the Achaeans, we will ransom them with gold and bronze, of which we have store, for the old man Altes endowed his daughter richly; but if they are already dead and in the house of Hades, sorrow will it be to us two who were their parents; albeit the grief of others will be more short-lived unless you too perish at the hands of Achilles. Come, then, my son, within the city, to be the guardian of Trojan men and Trojan women, or you will both lose your own life and afford a mighty triumph to the son of Peleus. Have pity also on your unhappy father while life yet remains to him—on me, whom the son of Kronos will destroy by a terrible doom on the threshold of old age, after I have seen my sons slain and my daughters hauled away as captives, my bridal chambers pillaged, little children dashed to earth amid the rage of battle, and my sons' wives dragged away by the cruel hands of the Achaeans; in the end fierce hounds will tear me in pieces at my own gates after some one has beaten the life out of my body with sword or spear—hounds that I myself reared and fed at my own table to guard my gates, but who will yet lap my blood and then lie all distraught at my doors. When a young man falls by the sword in battle, he may lie where he is and there is nothing unseemly; let what will be seen, all is honorable in death, but when an old man is slain there is nothing in this world more pitiable than that dogs should defile his gray hair and beard and all that men hide for shame."

The old man tore his gray hair as he spoke, but he moved not the heart of Hector. His mother hard by wept and moaned aloud as she bared her bosom and pointed to the breast which had

suckled him. "Hector," she cried, weeping bitterly the while, "Hector, my son, spurn not this breast, but have pity upon me too: if I have ever given you comfort from my own bosom, think on it now, dear son, and come within the wall to protect us from this man; stand not without to meet him. Should the wretch kill you, neither I nor your richly dowered wife shall ever weep, dear offshoot of myself, over the bed on which you lie, for dogs will devour you at the ships of the Achaeans."

Thus did the two with many tears implore their son, but they moved not the heart of Hector, and he stood his ground awaiting huge Achilles as he drew nearer towards him. As aserpent in its den upon the mountains, full fed with deadly poisons, waits for the approach of man—he is filled with fury and his eyes glare terribly as he goes writhing round his den—even so Hector leaned his shield against a tower that jutted out from the wall and stood where he was, undaunted.

"Alas," said he to himself in the heaviness of his heart, "if I go within the gates, Polydamas will be the first to heap reproach upon me, for it was he that urged me to lead the Trojans back to the city on that awful night when Achilles again came forth against us. I would not listen, but it would have been indeed better if I had done so. Now that my folly has destroyed the host, I dare not look Trojan men and Trojan women in the face, lest a worse man should say, 'Hector has ruined us by his self-confidence.' Surely it would be better for me to return after having fought Achilles and slain him, or to die gloriously here before the city. What, again, if I were to lay down my shield and helmet, lean my spear against the wall and go straight up to noble Achilles? What if I were to promise to give up Helen, who was the fountainhead of all this war, and all the treasure that Alexandrus brought with him in his ships to Troy, aye, and to let the Achaeans divide the half of everything that the city contains among themselves? I might make the Trojans, by the mouths of their princes, take a solemn oath that they would hide nothing, but would divide into two shares all that is within the city—but why argue with myself in this way? Were I to go up to him he would show me no kind of mercy; he would kill me then and there as easily as though I were a woman, when I had off my armor. There is no parleying with him from some rock or oak tree as young men and maidens prattle with one another. Better fight him at once, and learn to which of us Zeus will vouchsafe victory.". . .

. . . Then Hector said, as the life ebbed out of him, "I pray you by your life and knees, and by your parents, let not dogs devour me at the ships of the Achaeans, but accept the rich treasure of gold and bronze which my father and mother will offer you, and send my body home, that the Trojans and their wives may give me my dues of fire when I am dead."

Achilles glared at him and answered, "Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents; would that I could be as sure of being able to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill you have done me, as I am that nothing shall save you from the dogs—it shall not be, though they bring ten or twenty-fold ransom and weigh it out for me on the spot, with promise of yet more hereafter. Though Priam son of Dardanus should bid them offer me your weight in gold, even so your mother shall never lay you out and make lament over the son she bore, but dogs and vultures shall eat you utterly up."

Hector with his dying breath then said, "I know you what you are, and was sure that I should not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; look to it that I bring not heaven's anger upon you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the Scaean gates."

When he had thus said the shrouds of death enfolded him, whereon his soul went out of him and flew down to the house of Hades, lamenting its sad fate that it should enjoy youth and strength no longer. But Achilles said, speaking to the dead body, "Die; for my part I will accept my fate whensoever Zeus and the other gods see fit to send it."

DHARMASHASTRA (c. 600–c. 200 A.D.)

Gautama Sutra
Apastamba Sutra
Vasishtha Sutra
Laws of Manu
Vishnu Smriti

The shastras *in Sanskrit Hindu literature are the textbooks of religious and legal duty.* Shastra *literally means "rule, command, code of laws, science," and these works focus on many different subjects, including the three principal goals for human beings:* dharma *(law),* artha *(wealth, profit, business, or property), and* kama *(passion, desire, pleasure). The* Dharmashastra *concerns* dharma, *a concept that incorporates the nature of the world, eternal or cosmic law, and social law, applied to rituals and life-cycle rites, procedures for resolving disputes, and penalties for violations of these rules; the* Arthashastra *concerns economic affairs; and the* Kamashastra *concerns love generally and pleasure in particular. (The best known of its component works in the Western world is the* Kama sutra, *though contrary to popular belief, it is not a "sex book"). These texts are composed of books from individual schools of Vedic and Sanskrit commentary, each school often contributing a sutra named for the school. The* Dharmashastra *includes the following* dharmasutras: Gautama, Baudhayana, Apastamba, Vasishtha, Vishnu, *and* Vikhanas, *as well as the metrical* Laws of Manu.

The shastras, including the Dharmashastra, *are classified as* smriti, *a word indicating "what is remembered," as distinct from the* Vedas *and the* Upanishads *[q.v.], which are* shruti, *"what is heard." The* Vedas *and the* Upanishads *are considered to be divinely perceived—that is, the early seers were held to have perceived eternal truths—and the* Dharmashastra, *as well as other* smriti *texts, are the thoughts and explanations of Hindu scholars in response to the* shruti *books. Chronologically, the sutras of the* Dharmahshastra *follow sometime after the Vedic period, but these works have been notoriously difficult to date. Most scholars agree, however, that the first three sutras from which selections are included in this volume,* Gautama, Apastamba, *and* Vasishtha, *fall sometime between the 6th century* B.C. *and the 1st century* B.C., *while the* Laws of Manu *probably date from between about 200* B.C. *to 200* A.D. *From the time of their composition, the works of the* Dharmashastra *have played a significant role in influencing Hindu culture and law. In fact, the* shastras *were still being cited in cases of legal contracts as late as the mid-19th century in some regions of India.*

The Gautama Dharmasutra, *the oldest of the texts of the Dharmashastra, probably composed sometime between 600 and 400* B.C., *concerns the sources of dharma, standards for both students and the uninitiated, the four stages of life, dietary rules, penance, rules concerning impurity, and many other regulations and rituals for Hindu life. The section presented here concerns impurity and holds that after the burial of a suicide victim who voluntarily sought death, purity (rather than impurity) follows for their relatives.*

The Dharmasutra of Apastamba *was most likely composed sometime between 450 and 350* B.C. *It is an extensive work with many aphoristic verses and meticulously detailed rituals for daily life. Some of the prominent subject matter includes rules about marriage and married life, forbidden foods*

and dietary regulations, ritual purity, property laws, rebirth, and various penances. This sutra details various methods of self-destruction that will exculpate violators of certain Hindu laws—fornication with the wife of a religious teacher, drinking alcohol, theft, or murder of a high-caste man—and relieve them of their impurity. It also includes contrary rules, including a prohibition of self-killing.

The Vasishtha Dharmasutra *was probably written sometime between 300 and 100* B.C. *This sutra is known for its sections on adoption, but it also concerns justice, legal testimony, inheritance, interest rates, and other matters of social law. Several issues surrounding suicide are raised in the text, including penances for those who contemplate suicide or fail in an attempt at self-killing; these are unpermitted suicides. As in the* Apastamba *sutra, which it echoes, suicide can also be an act of expiation for unlawful behavior, restoring one to purity after death.*

The Laws of Manu *are perhaps the most famous part of the* Dharmashastra, *composed in the later part of the Epic Period and often given separate recognition because of their unique metrical style. The* Laws of Manu *articulate extensive regulations for many aspects of Hindu life, including rules governing religious offerings, purifications, rites, and many other religious and social practices. This code, like Hindu thought generally, distinguishes between unpermitted and permitted suicides. In Book V, suicides are grouped with heretics, those who fail to perform the appropriate religious rites, and those of mixed caste: libations may not be offered to them. In Book VI, the code compares the person who is alive to a servant awaiting payment from his master (an analogy also employed by Plato [q.v.], though yielding a differing conclusion), explaining that one should neither "desire to die" nor "desire to live." In many of their other passages, however, the* Laws of Manu *emphasize the value of leaving the body and becoming free of its pains and torment, as well as achieving full liberation from worldliness and desire. Books VI and XI address the means by which the Brahmana or renouncer should separate himself from his body. Based on the teaching of the four stages of life, developed in the text in detail, the* Laws of Manu *hold that, after one has become old and passed through the three previous stages of life—celibate religious discipleship, married householder status, and, after one's grandchildren are born, retirement to the forest—one should simply walk in a northeasterly direction—in this version, without food or water—until one dies. It is in this stage that one becomes a* sanyasin, *achieving the highest level of spirituality. This journey that ends in death is often called "the Great Departure."*

Sources

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from DHARMASHASTRA

GAUTAMA SUTRA XIV

(The relatives) of those who are slain for the sake of cows and Brâhmanas (become pure) immediately after the burial . . .

And (those of men destroyed) by the anger of the king . . .

(Further, those of men killed) in battle . . .

Likewise (those) of men who voluntarily (die) by starving themselves to death, by weapons, fire, poison, or water, by hanging themselves, or by jumping (from a precipice).

APASTAMBA SUTRA I.9.25, I.10.28.17

He who has had connection with a Guru's wife shall cut off his organ together with the testicles, take them into his joined hands and walk towards the south without stopping, until he falls down dead.

Or he may die embracing a heated metal image of a woman.

A drinker of spirituous liquor shall drink exceedingly hot liquor so that he dies.

A thief shall go to the king with flying hair, carrying a club on his shoulder, and tell him his deed. He (the king) shall give him a blow with that (club). If the thief dies, his sin is expiated.

If he is forgiven (by the king), the guilt falls upon him who forgives him,

Or he may throw himself into the fire, or perform repeatedly severe austerities,

Or he may kill himself by diminishing daily his portion of food. . . .

(A man of any caste) excepting the first, who has slain a man of the first caste, shall go on a battle-field and place himself (between the two hostile armies). There they shall kill him (and thereby he becomes pure).

Or such a sinner may tear from his body and make the priest offer as a burnt-offering his hair, skin, flesh, and the rest, and then throw himself into the fire. . . .

. . . But the violator of a Guru's bed shall enter a hollow iron image and, having caused a fire to be lit on both sides, he shall burn himself.

According to Hârita, this (last-mentioned penance must) not (be performed).

For he who takes his own or another's life becomes an Abhisasta [outcaste].

VASISHTHA SUTRA XX, XXIII

He who violates a Guru's bed shall cut off his organ, together with the testicles, take them into his joined hands and walk towards the south wherever he meets with an obstacle (to further progress), there he shall stand until he dies:

Or, having shaved all his hair and smeared his body with clarified butter, he shall embrace the heated (iron) image (of a woman). It is declared in the Veda that he is purified after death. . . .

If a man has stolen gold belonging to a Brâhmana, he shall run, with flying hair, to the king, (exclaiming) 'Ho, I am a thief; sir, punish me!' The king shall give him a weapon made of Udumbara wood; with that he shall kill himself. It is declared in the Veda that he becomes pure after death.

Or (such a thief) may shave off all his hair, anoint his body with clarified butter, and cause himself to be burnt from the feet upwards, in a fire of dry cowdung. It is declared in the Veda that he becomes pure after death. . . .

For him who committing suicide becomes an Abhisasta, his blood-relations (sapinda) shall not perform the funeral rites.

He is called a suicide who destroys himself by means of wood, water, clods of earth, stones, weapons, poison, or a rope.

Now they quote also (the following verse): 'The twice-born man who out of affection performs the last rites for a suicide, shall perform a Kândrâyana penance together with a Taptakrikkhra.'

We shall describe the Kândrâyana below.

A fast of three days (must be performed) for resolving to die by one's own hand.

'He who attempts suicide, but remains alive, shall perform a Krikkhra penance during twelve days. (Afterwards) he shall fast for three (days and) nights, being dressed constantly in a garment smeared (with clarified butter), and suppressing his breath, he shall thrice recite the Aghamarshana.'

LAWS OF MANU V, VI

Libations of water shall not be offered to those who (neglect the prescribed rites and may be said to) have been born in vain, to those born in consequence of an illegal mixture of the castes, to those who are ascetics (of heretical sects), and to those who have committed suicide . . .

These and other observances must a Brahmana who dwells in the forest diligently practise, and in order to attain complete (union with) the (supreme) Soul, (he must study) the various sacred texts contained in the Upanishads,

(As well as those rites and texts) which have been practised and studied by the sages (Rishis), and by Brahmana householders, in order to increase their knowledge (of Brahman), and their austerity, and in order to sanctify their bodies;

Or let him walk, fully determined and going straight on, in a northeasterly direction, subsisting on water and air, until his body sinks to rest.

A Brahmana, having got rid of his body by one of those modes practised by the great sages, is exalted in the world of Brahman, free from sorrow and fear. . . .

Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live; let him wait for (his appointed) time, as a servant (waits) for the payment of his wages. . . .

Let him quit this dwelling, composed of the five elements, where the bones are the beams, which is held together by tendons (instead of cords), where the flesh and the blood are the mortar, which is thatched with the skin, which is foul-smelling, filled with urine and ordure, infested by old age and sorrow, the seat of disease, harassed by pain, gloomy with passion, and perishable.

He who leaves this body, (be it by necessity) as a tree (that is torn from) the river-bank, or (freely) like a bird (that) quits a tree, is freed from the misery (of this world, dreadful like) a shark.

Making over (the merit of his own) good actions to his friends and (the guilt of) his evil deeds to his enemies, he attains the eternal Brahman by the practice of meditation.

VISHNU SMRITI XXV

Now the duties of a woman (are as follows). . . . After the death of her husband, to preserve her chastity, or to ascend the pile after him.

THE JAIN TRADITION
(599–527 B.C. to 5th century A.D.)

Acaranga Sutra: The Seventh Lecture, called Liberation (in Archive only)

Upasaka-Dashah: Ten Chapters on Lay Attenders: The Story of Ananda **(in Archive only)**

Tattvartha Sutra: Passionless End is Not Suicide (expanded in Archive)

Although the origins of the Jain tradition are unknown, some have speculated that, like Buddhism, it developed within Hinduism. Mahavira, the figure recognized by the Jain tradition as the last of a chain of twenty-four omniscient teachers or Jinas, was roughly contemporaneous with the Buddha some two and a half millennia ago. According to traditional dates, Mahavira lived from 599 to 527 B.C.*; however, scholars who accept a later date for the Buddha would adjust Mahavira's dates accordingly, approximately 100 years after the earliest traditional dating. Mahavira and the Buddha lived and taught in the same region, though there is no record that they ever met. In their central departure from the brahmanical tradition, Mahavira and the Buddha did not accept the Vedas, primarily because they rejected the sorts of sacrifices associated with the Vedas but which violated the key principle of* ahimsa *or nonviolence.*

*The ethics of suicide are seen rather differently in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, even though these traditions spring from some of the same roots and although the difference may be as much a matter of emphasis as of normative view. The Hindus, especially the Brahman lawgivers, generally held that suicide was not permitted, except as a penalty for a great crime, or when an ascetic chooses to end his life, or when a figure of great spirituality walks toward the Himalayas in "the Great Departure," the journey that ends in death. Buddhists permitted suicide only in exceptional cases, usually cases of self-sacrifice to relieve the suffering of another; in self-respecting cases, it held, rather, that a person should wait and bear suffering without seeking to escape. But Jains permitted—indeed, revered—*sallekhana *as the culmination of one's present life and the transition of the soul into the next.*

Sallekhana*, also called* santhara *or* santharo *in the Shvetambara branch of Jain tradition, sometimes called "spiritual death through fasting," is the central austerity that forms the ideal conclusion of a life of progressive stages of asceticism and withdrawal from the necessities of ordinary life. Jains are adamant that* sallekhana *is not suicide, and although it is the believer who knowingly and voluntarily takes the steps that lead to his or her death, this is not considered self-destruction. Rather, death in this way provides a measure of control of the transition from one life to the next, recognizing, as do all Indian religions, that the last moments of a person's life are of utmost importance in determining the condition of one's subsequent incarnation. It is "scratching out body to save soul."*

In Jain belief, there are certain conditions in which sallekhana *can be performed, essentially those in which the purposes of life have been served and circumstances are such that one's religious vows would be compromised. Most commonly, Jains ask for permission to undertake* sallekhana *in the case of terminal illness, when death is imminent. Other circumstances have been permissible for monks and nuns, namely in order to head off a catastrophe that would cause them to compromise*

their vows of total renunciation, such as blindness or the inability to walk and collect alms, or in the case of an unavoidable calamity, such as severe drought. It is said that Mahavira's parents, who were followers of the 23rd Jina, named Parshvanatha, undertook sallekhana *at the end of their lives.*

Sallekhana *is not to be conflated with suicide in any usual sense, and it is to be done without striving, without passion, and without emotional arousal or turmoil of any form. It must observe the central ethical principles in Jainism, nonviolence and the avoidance of spiritual contamination.* Sallekhana *is seen as a wise or holy death for which one should prepare for one's entire life. In contrast, suicide, which in the Jain view arises from ignorance, despair, inadequacy, anger, agony, and the like, and which does violence to the body with methods like poisons or weapons, or hanging oneself or jumping from a cliff, is a "fool's death."*

In Jain thought, an "impure" death by suicide involves an increase in the passions; a "pure" death, as in sallekhana, *does not. This is an important distinction for Jain theology; passions are seen as a direct cause of the influx of karma impurities to the soul and they thus result in rebirth at a lower level, while a passionless state of mind leads to both the cessation of the accumulation of karma and the destruction of existing karma that is already attached to one's soul. Thus, in Jain belief, by liberating oneself from the passions, one liberates the soul. Further, sallekhana is to be seen as the ultimate expression of the Jain doctrine of* ahimsa *or nonviolence, since by ceasing to eat, one stops both the intentional and unintentional destruction of all living beings.*

In sallekhana, *one gradually reduces one's intake of food and liquids so that the body is "scoured out"* (sallikita) *of its negative elements; thus the mind can focus exclusively upon spiritual matters, without disrupting the inner peace within.* Sallekhana *is to be performed with a sacred formula on one's lips, and only with the approval of one's immediate (Jain) spiritual advisor. It must involve "pure means." It is a peaceful, voluntary, planned religious death, to be undertaken with full joy and calmness of mind. A person may have taken a vow to perform* sallekhana *well in advance, not knowing when the appropriate time would arrive, but when it does arrive, one seeks leave to do so from one's teacher or mentor, engages in confession, self-censure, and the ritual of forgiving and asking forgiveness, and enters upon a course of fasting and renunciation that will end in death.* Sallekhana *may be seen as the logical conclusion to a life dedicated to nonviolence and restraint. Death is not to be sought or wished for, nor may it be tainted by any overt desires concerning rebirth, but it is the expected and accepted outcome of these austerities. A request for leave to undertake* sallekhana *is not granted lightly; part of the teacher's role is to determine whether a given individual has in fact attained the degree of spiritual development and discipline required for this sustained practice. Death is to occur while fully conscious, in a state of complete awareness, while in meditation. This is in accord with the "universal prayer" of the Jains:*

Cessation of sorrow,
Cessation of karmas,
Death while in meditation,
The attainment of enlightenment;
O holy Jina! Friend of the entire universe,
Let these be mine,
For I have taken refuge at your feet.

Although originally sallekhana *may have been a practice of ascetics, it gradually extended to the laity, and hundreds of inscriptions all over India record and glorify the* sallekhana *of both male and female Jains, including husband-wife couples. The practice seems to have ceased to play even an ideal role in lay spirituality by about the 12th century. However, modern Jain communities still sometimes see*

sallekhana *deaths, like that of the great Digambara Jain teacher Shantisagara, who performed the ritual fasting until death in 1955. Somewhat in common with Western medical practices involving voluntary cessation of eating and drinking as a passive alternative to physician-assisted suicide or active euthanasia,* sallekhana, *also called santhara, is also practiced by some contemporary Jains in extreme old age or terminal illness. Recent legal challenges in contemporary India have raised the issue of whether "fasting to death" is constitutionally protected as a religious practice or is unconstitutional, a "social evil" analogous to the outlawed Hindu practice of* sati *[q.v. under Bana, Hindu widow, and elsewhere]. Opponents of* santhara *call it "cold-blooded murder"; proponents say that the Jains who do so "do it consciously to attain enlightenment" and that it is a "religious achievement"; they are emphatic that it not be spoken of as "suicide." Several hundred Jains, especially in the state of Rajasthan, perform the ritual of sallekhana each year.*

The Acaranga Sutra *(c. 3rd–2nd centuries* B.C.*), the earliest known writing on the rules of conduct for mendicant monks and nuns in the Shvetambara tradition, is the first text, or limb, in the Shvetambara canon, which was transmitted orally for centuries. Tradition relates that the knowledge contained in these texts was transmitted by Mahavira directly to his chief mendicant disciples, who then systematized his teachings into the 12 Angas, and that a final redaction was made at the Council of Valabhi in the 5th century* A.D. *The first and third lessons are about the importance of non-harm* (ahimsa) *to all living beings and of adhering to vows that one has taken. They provide a context for understanding the lessons regarding how life may end. The third lesson refers literally to cold; in the fourth lesson, the reference to cold is interpreted in the authoritative tradition as reference to potential seduction by a woman. The fourth lesson appears to permit suicide by poison or other means for the mendicant who cannot keep his vows including "the influence of cold," understood by the authoritative commentaries as being unwillingly seduced by a woman; however, such suicide only puts off the last struggle for* nirvana, *though it is better than breaking the vow. Ending one's life by means such as this, however, was permissible for mendicants if they found themselves in circumstances where their vows of chastity would likely be compromised or if their mendicant community would be defamed. Under these conditions, these were not "fool's deaths" and it would not preclude attaining an auspicious rebirth. A religious death,* sallekhana *or* itvara *(the latter consisting in starving oneself while keeping within a limited space), is usually permitted only to those who have undergone preparatory penance, chiefly protracted periods of fasting, over a period of 12 years.*

The Upasaka-Dashah *("Ten Lectures on the Religious Profession of a Layman") is the seventh text in the Shvetambara canon. One of the stories is about Ananda, a rich man who was a lay disciple of Mahavira. Ananda gradually withdraws from his wealth and, following precepts dictated to him by Mahavira, dies the religious death of* sallekhana.

The Tattvartha Sutra, *attributed to Umasvati/Umasvami (c. 2nd–5th centuries* A.D.*), insists that the passionless end that the householder seeks in* sallekhana *is not suicide. The opening line, "The householder courts voluntary death at the end of his life," is the sutra itself; the remainder is commentary by the Digambara monk Pujyapada (6th century* A.D.*).*

Sources

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from ACARANGA SUTRA

THE SEVENTH LECTURE, CALLED LIBERATION

First Lesson

. . . Everywhere sins are admitted; but to avoid them is called my distinction. For ye who live in a village or in the forest, or not in a village and not in the forest, know the law as it has been declared. 'By the Brahman, the wise (Mahâvîra), three vows [to kill no living being, to speak no untruth, and to abstain from forbidden things such as theft and sexual pleasures] have been enjoined.' Noble and tranquil men who are enlightened and exert themselves in these (precepts), are called free from sinful acts.

Knowing (and renouncing) severally and singly the actions against living beings, in the regions above, below, and on the surface, everywhere and in all ways—a wise man neither gives pain to these bodies, nor orders others to do so, nor assents to their doing so. Nay, we abhor those who give pain to these bodies. Knowing this, a wise man should not cause this or any other pain (to any creatures). Thus I say.

Third Lesson

Some are awakened as middle-aged men and exert themselves well, having, as clever men, heard and received the word of the learned. The noble ones have impartially preached the law. Those who are awakened, should not wish for pleasure, nor do harm, nor desire (any forbidden things). A person who is without desires and does no harm unto any living beings in the whole world, is called by me 'unfettered.'

One free from passions understands perfectly the bright one, knowing birth in the upper and nether regions.

'Bodies increase through nourishment, they are frail in hardships.' See some whose organs are failing (give way to weakness).

A person who has no desires, cherishes pity. He who understands the doctrine of sin, is a mendicant who knows the time, the strength, the measure, the occasion, the conduct, the religious precept; he disowns all things not requisite for religious purposes, in time exerts himself, is under no

obligations; he proceeds securely (on the road to final liberation) after having cut off both (love and hate).

A householder approaching a mendicant whose limbs tremble for cold may say:

O long-lived Sramana! Are you not subject to the influences of your senses?

O long-lived householder! I am not subject to the influences of my senses. But I cannot sustain the feeling of cold. Yet it does not become me to kindle or light a fire, that I may warm or heat myself; nor (to procure that comfort) through the order of others.

Perhaps after the mendicant has spoken thus, the other kindles or lights a fire that he may warm or heat himself. But the mendicant should well observe and understand this, that he may order him to show no such obsequiousness. Thus I say.

Fourth Lesson

. . . When it occurs to a blessed mendicant that he suffers pain, and cannot bear the influence of cold [seduction by a woman], he should not try to obviate these trials, but stand fast in his own self which is endowed with all knowledge. 'For it is better for an ascetic that he should take poison.' Even thus he will in due time put an end to existence. This (way to escape trials) has been adopted by many who were free from delusion; it is good, wholesome, proper, beatifying, meritorious. Thus I say.

Fifth Lesson

. . . When the thought occurs to a mendicant that through illness he is too weak, and not able to beg from house to house—and on his thus complaining a householder brings food, &c., obtained (without injuring life), and gives it [to] him—then he should, after deliberation, say: O long-lived householder! It does not become me to eat or drink this food, &c., or (accept) anything else of the same kind.

A mendicant who has resolved, that he will, when sick, accept the assistance of fellow-ascetics in good health, when they offer (assistance) without being asked, and that vice versa he, when in health, will give assistance to sick fellow-ascetics, offering it without being asked—(he should not deviate from his resolution though he die for want of help).

Taking the vow to beg (food, &c.) for another (who is sick), and to eat (when sick) what is brought by another; taking the vow to beg, &c., and not to eat what is brought; taking the vow not to beg, &c., but to eat what is brought; taking the vow neither to beg, &c., not to eat what is brought—(one should adhere to that vow). Practising thus the law as it has been declared, one becomes tranquil, averted from sin, guarded against the allurements of the senses. Even thus (though sick) he will in due time put an end to existence. This (method) has been adopted by many who were free from delusion; it is good, wholesome, proper, beatifying, meritorious. Thus I say.

Sixth Lesson

. . . When the thought occurs to a mendicant: 'I am myself, alone; I have nobody belonging to me, nor do I belong to anybody,' then he should thoroughly know himself as standing

alone—aspiring to freedom from bonds. Penance suits him. Knowing what the Revered One has declared, one should thoroughly and in all respects conform to it. . . .

If this thought occurs to a monk: 'I am sick and not able, at this time, to regularly mortify the flesh,' that monk should regularly reduce his food; regularly reducing his food, and diminishing his sins, 'he should take proper care of his body, being immovable like a beam; exerting himself he dissolves his body.'

Entering a village, or a scot-free town, or a town with an earth-wall, or a town with a small wall, or an isolated town, or a large town, or a sea-town, or a mine, or a hermitage, or the halting-places of processions, or caravans, or a capital—a monk should beg for straw; having begged for straw he should retire with it to a secluded spot. After having repeatedly examined and cleaned the ground, where there are no eggs, nor living beings, nor seeds, nor sprouts, nor dew, nor water, nor ants, nor mildew, nor waterdrops, nor mud, nor cobwebs—he should spread the straw on it. Then he should there and then effect (the religious death called) itvara.

This is the truth: speaking truth, free from passion, crossing (the samsâra), abating irresoluteness, knowing all truth and not being known, leaving this frail body, overcoming all sorts of pains and troubles through trust in this (religion), he accomplishes this fearful (religious death). Even thus he will in due time put an end to existence. This has been adopted by many who were free from delusion; it is good, wholesome, proper, beatifying, meritorious. Thus I say.

Eighth Lesson

The wise ones who attain in due order to one of the unerring states (in which suicide is prescribed), those who are rich in control and endowed with knowledge, knowing the incomparable (religious death, should continue their contemplation). Knowing the twofold (obstacles, i.e. bodily and mental), the wise ones, having thoroughly learned the law, perceiving in due order (that the time for their death has come), get rid of karman. Subduing the passions and living on little food, he should endure (hardships). If a mendicant falls sick, let him again take food.

He should not long for life, nor wish for death; he should yearn after neither, life or death. He who is indifferent and wishes for the destruction of karman, should continue his contemplation. Becoming unattached internally and externally, he should strive after absolute purity.

Whatever means one knows for calming one's own life, that a wise man should learn (i.e. practise) in order to gain time (for continuing penance).

In a village or in a forest, examining the ground and recognising it as free from living beings, the sage should spread the straw.

Without food he should lie down and bear the pains which attack him. He should not for too long time give way to worldly feelings which overcome him. When crawling animals or such as live on high or below, feed on his flesh and blood, he should neither kill them nor rub (the wound).

Though these animals destroy the body, he should not stir from his position. After the âsravas have ceased, he should bear (pains) as if he rejoiced in them. When the bonds fall off, then he has accomplished his life.

(We shall now describe) a more exalted (method) for a well-controlled and instructed monk.

This other law has been proclaimed by Gñâtriputra:

He should give up all motions except his own in the thrice-threefold way. He should not lie on sprouts of grass, but inspecting the bare ground he should lie on it.

Without any comfort and food, he should there bear pain.

When the sage becomes weak in his limbs, he should strive after calmness.

For he is blameless, who is well fixed and immovable (in his intention to die).

He should move to and fro (on his ground), contract and stretch (his limbs) for the benefit of the whole body; or (he should remain quiet as if he were) lifeless.

He should walk about, when tired of (lying), or stand with passive limbs; when tired of standing, he should sit down. Intent on such an uncommon death, he should regulate the motions of his organs. Having attained a place swarming with insects, he should search for a clean spot. He should not remain there whence sin would rise. He should raise himself above (sinfulness), and bear all pains.

And this is a still more difficult method, when one lives according to it: not to stir from one's place, while checking all motions of the body.

This is the highest law, exalted above the preceding method:

Having examined a spot of bare ground he should remain there; stay O Brâhmana!

Having attained a place free from living beings, he should there fix himself.

He should thoroughly mortify his flesh, thinking: There are no obstacles in my body.

Knowing as long as he lives the dangers and troubles, the wise and restrained (ascetic) should bear them as being instrumental to the dissolution of the body. He should not be attached to the transitory pleasures, nor to the greater ones; he should not nourish desire and greed, looking only for eternal praise.

He should be enlightened with eternal objects, and not trust in the delusive power of the Gods; a Brâhmana should know of this and cast off all inferiority.

Not devoted to any of the external objects he reaches the end of his life; thinking that patience is the highest good, he (should choose) one of (the described three) good methods of entering Nirvâna. Thus I say.

TATTVARTHA SUTRA

PASSIONLESS END IS NOT SUICIDE

The householder courts voluntary death at the end of his life.

The loss of the senses and the vitalities at the end of one's duration of life acquired by one's own dispositions is death. The end refers to the particular state of existence. That which has death as the end is *maraṇāntah.* That which has death as its object is *māraṇāntikī.* To make the body and the passions thin is *sallekhanā.*

Sallekhanā is making the physical body and the internal passions emaciated by abandoning their sources gradually at the approach of death. The householder observes *sallekhanā* at the end of his life. '*Joṣitā*' means observing it with pleasure. Hence *sevitā*, though clear in meaning, is not used. If there be no willingness, *sallekhanā* cannot be forced on one. If there is liking for it one does it oneself.

It is argued that it is suicide, since there is voluntary severance of life etc. No, it is not suicide, as there is no passion. Injury consists in the destruction of life actuated by passion.

Without attachment etc. there is no passion in this undertaking. A person, who kills himself by means of poison, weapons, etc., swayed by attachment, aversion or infatuation, commits suicide. But he who practises holy death is free from desire, anger and delusion. Hence it is not suicide. "It has been taught by Lord Jina that the absence of attachment and the other passions is non-injury and that the rise of feelings of attachment and the other passions is injury." For instance, a merchant collects commodities for sale and stores them. He does not welcome the destruction of his storehouse. The destruction of the storehouse is against his wishes. And, when some danger threatens the storehouse, he tries to safeguard it. But if he cannot avert the danger, he tries to save the commodities at least from ruin. Similarly, a householder is engaged in acquiring the commodity of vows and supplementary vows. And he does not desire the ruin of the receptacle of these virtues, namely the body. But when serious danger threatens the body, he tries to avert it in a righteous manner without violating his vows. In case it is not possible to avert danger to the body, he tries to safeguard his vows at least. How can such a procedure be called suicide?

CONFUCIUS (551–479 B.C.)

from *The Analects*
from *The Book of Filial Piety*

Confucius (Kongzi), often regarded as the greatest of the Chinese sages and as the most profound influence on Chinese civilization in general, was born in 551 B.C. in the state of Lu, in modern Shandong, where his descendants still live. The name Confucius is a Latinized form of the Chinese Kongfuzi, *meaning "Master Kong," drawn from his family name Kong. Much of what is believed about his life is legendary. Confucius is said to have been the youngest of 11 children in a family that was noble but fairly poor; his father died when he was about three. Confucius devoted himself to the study of ancient Chinese literature known as the* Five Classics, *including the* Shu Jing, *or* Book of Documents, *the* Shi Jing, *or* Book of Odes, *also called the* Book of Songs, *and the* Yi Jing, *or* Book of Changes, *a divination manual. According to traditional sources, he occupied various minor posts and was made minister of justice at about the age of 51 until his resignation c. 495 B.C. Confucius wandered from state to state for the next 13 years, teaching the* Five Classics *and attempting to persuade the state rulers he met of the need for social, political, and moral reforms. He spoke in favor of making education available to all, and promoted a view of education as dedicated to the advancement of character rather than vocational training. He was the first to advocate in any sustained way the notion of moral education through the rituals of the ancient dynasties and to insist that moral reform through such education could restore peace and harmony to society. His teachings are rooted in a deeply humanistic worldview, emphasizing the concept of* ren, *variously translated as "goodness," "benevolence," or "humaneness," which he saw as the highest virtue. The man of* ren

who is capable of genuinely empathetic understanding that combines conscientiousness and altruism is the morally ideal person.

The work most directly associated with Confucius is The Analects, *a collection of sayings attributed to Confucius and accounts of his deeds, together with his reflections on the Chinese classics.* The Analects *was probably put together by his pupils and their pupils, and finally consolidated by Han scholars some five or six centuries after Confucius's death. The material is not systematic and is in some places historically inaccurate; it also includes some material that is clearly of much later date, as well as some that is alien or hostile. Nevertheless,* The Analects *is recognized as the most reliable source of Confucius's thought. The* Xiao Jing, *or* Book of Filial Piety, *a collection circulating in part before Confucius but, by tradition, attributed to him, depicts conversations between Confucius and his disciple Zengzi, one of Confucius's followers particularly renowned for the virtue of filial piety. The* Book of Filial Piety *was probably compiled by members of Master Zeng's school and consolidated in later centuries. Both texts identify the duty of filial piety as a central ethical obligation: the obligation to love and care for one's parents. The implications of this duty for the question of suicide are evident in both texts: one must not harm or destroy one's body.*

Analects *8.3 depicts Master Zeng, the disciple who is Confucius's interlocutor in the* Book of Filial Piety, *as he is dying. Zengzi is asking his students to look at his hands and feet to ensure that he is still whole, and expresses satisfaction that he has preserved his body intact throughout his life—a duty central to filial piety. Thus Zengzi can expose his hands and feet, often at risk in early China, where amputation was a common punishment.*

To injure or destroy one's own body, or to allow it to be injured or destroyed, would be to violate one's obligation to one's parents; this obligation presumably precludes suicide. Consonant with this, the selection from the Book of Filial Piety, *framed in the voice of Confucius, also describes the obligation to care for and preserve oneself, including one's own body, as central to the obligation of filial piety.*

Analects *8.13 and 14.12 both address willingness to give up one's life, in 8.13 for the Dao or "Way," and in 14.12 in times of danger as a characteristic of the "complete" or fully virtuous and cultured gentleman; it may also include a willingness to voluntarily sacrifice one's life, not just risk the loss of it. The first three exemplary individuals mentioned in 14.12 are respected state officials; Ran Qiu was one of Confucius's disciples.*

Analects *14.16 and 14.17 refer to events that took place during the reign of Duke Huan, the official hegemon from 681–643 B.C. Duke Huan and his brother Prince Jiu were both exiles from their home state of Qi, which was ruled by their eldest brother. While in exile, Prince Jiu was served by his retainers Shao Hu and Guan Zhong. Upon their eldest brother's death, Duke Huan, the youngest brother, returned to Qi to usurp power and ordered the death of his elder brother Prince Jiu and the return of his retainers Shao Hu and Guan Zhong. The expectation of the time was that retainers would commit suicide rather than serve another lord, and this is what Shao Hu did. However, Guan Zhong, on the other hand, willingly returned to serve Duke Huan and became his Prime Minister. It is not clear whether Confucius approves or disapproves of this serious breach of propriety; Confucius questions Guan Zhong's* ren, *"benevolence" or "goodness," the highest virtue for Confucius. Guan Zhong subsequently became a very famous political figure, and one of the most important political texts of the time, the* Guanzi, *was attributed to (and named after) him.*

Analects *15.9 acknowledges that in some cases, morally ideal people will knowingly bring about their own destruction for virtuous ends. Although this passage is often translated as claiming that morally ideal people will sometimes "sacrifice" their lives in order to achieve goodness or* ren, *the*

Confucian text translated literally reads "kill themselves." However, the focus seems to be on doing what is necessary to accord with ren, *not on suicide per se. The extent to which Confucius distinguishes "suicide" from other forms of self-caused death is not entirely clear.*

Over his lifetime, many gentleman-scholars and literati gathered around Confucius. Sima Qian's [q.v.] Records of the Historian *claims that by the time Confucius died, he had some 3,000 followers. Although, when at the age of 72 he was dying, Confucius is said to have felt that his life had not been a success, he has had incalculable effect on Chinese ethical and political thought. For centuries, as Edward Slingerland points out, in order to pass China's civil service examinations, every educated Chinese person was required to memorize the* Analects *until the last nationwide exams in the early 20th century.*

Sources

Confucius, *The Analects*, 8.3, 8.13, 14.12, 14.16, 14.17, 15.9, tr. Eirik Lang Harris. Some interpretive material from Confucius, *The Analects*, tr. Edward Slingerland, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003; also from Eirik Lang Harris and Eric L. Hutton; Confucius, *The Book of Filial Piety*, tr. Eirik Lang Harris. Some interpretive material from *The Sacred Books of the East: The Texts of Confucianism*, Vol. III, Part I: The Shu King. The Religious Portions of the Shih King. The Hsiao King, tr. James Legge, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1899, and from Eirik Lang Harris.

from THE ANALECTS

8.3

Zengzi was dying and summoned his students, "Uncover my feet! Uncover my hands! The *Book of Odes* says,

> *'Trembling and cautious;*
> *As if overlooking a deep abyss;*
> *As if treading upon thin ice.'*

But now, whatever may come, I know that I have escaped [mutilation], my young ones."

8.13

The Master [Confucius] said, "Be earnestly trustworthy and love learning, and defend unto death the excellent Way. Do not enter an imperiled state; do not dwell within a disordered state. If the empire possesses the Way, then allow yourself to be seen. If it lacks the Way, then remain hidden. If a state possesses the Way, then if one is poor and humble, this is shameful. If a state lacks the Way, then if one is rich and honored, this is shameful."

14.12

Zilu asked what was meant by a 'complete person.'

The Master said, "One who is as wise as Zang Wuzhong, who is like Gongchuo in not being covetous, who is as brave as Zhuangzi of Bian, who is as artistically talented as Ran

Qiu, and who refines these traits by means of ritual and music, such a person could be called a 'complete person.'"

He continued, "But in the present time, is it necessary that a 'complete person' have all of these attributes? If, when one sees a chance for profit, one thinks about what is right, when one sees danger one is prepared to give up one's life, when he does not forget for his entire life a promise made long ago, then one may be called a 'complete person.'"

14.16

Zilu said, "When Duke Huan killed [his brother] Prince Jiu, Prince Jiu's advisor, Shao Hu, died for Prince Jiu, but his other advisor, Guan Zhong did not."

He continued, "Is Guan Zhong not lacking in *ren* [goodness]?"

The Master replied, "The reason why Duke Huan was able on numerous occasions to unite the feudal lords without resorting to war chariots was because of Guan Zhong's strength. But in regards to his *ren*, in regards to his *ren* . . ."

14.17

Zigong said, "Guan Zhong was not *ren*, was he? When When Duke Huan killed [his brother] Prince Jiu, Guan Zhong was not able to die for Prince Jiu, and moreover served as Duke Huan's Prime Minister."

The Master said, "When Guan Zhong served as Duke Huan's Prime Minister, he made the Duke hegemon over the feudal lords and united the empire. Even today, people are still benefiting from this. Were it not for Guan Zhong, we might all be wearing our hair loose and fastening the fronts of our garments on the left [as barbarians do]. How can we expect of him the petty sincerity of a common husband or wife, to hang himself in some ravine or ditch, with no one knowing of it?"

15.9

The Master said, "Among those who have [good] purpose and those who are *ren*, none will seek life at the expense of harming *ren*, and there are those who will cause death for their person in order to accomplish what is [or accords with] *ren*."

from THE BOOK OF FILIAL PIETY

Once, when Confucius was resting at home, Zengzi was attending him. The Master said, "The Former Kings used the ultimate virtue and the crucial method in order to cause the empire to submit [to their authority]. Because of this the people were harmonious and peaceful, and there was no resentment between superiors and subordinates. Do you know what it was?"

Zengzi rose from his mat respectfully and replied, "I am not perceptive; how could I be capable of knowing this?"

The Master said, "It was filial piety—the root of virtue and that from which all teaching stems. Sit down again and I shall explain it to you. Our body, limbs, hair, and skin are received from our parents, and so we do not dare to injure or harm them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we establish ourselves and practice the Way so as to make our name known to future generations and thereby bring glory to our parents, this is the consummation of filial piety. Filial piety begins in service to our parents, continues in service to our lord, and is consummated in establishing our place in the world [and therefore our parents' reputations].

The 'Daya' section of the *Book of Odes* says,

Never forget your ancestors;
Cultivate your virtue.

SOPHOCLES
(c. 496–406 B.C.)

from *Ajax* (expanded in Archive)
from *Oedipus at Colonus*

Sophocles was born in about 496 B.C., the son of a wealthy Athenian, an armor manufacturer, and played a distinguished part in the public life of Athens. Noted for his perfect craftsmanship as a playwright, Sophocles wrote some 123 plays and met with wide critical success; he took first place at between 18 and 24 tragedy competitions. Unfortunately, only seven of Sophocles' plays have survived, none from the first 25 years of his creative life. Among those that do survive, the best known are Oedipus Rex *and* Antigone, *but* Ajax *and* Oedipus at Colonus, *from which the selections here are taken, are of similar dramatic stature.*

Sophocles' view of life is a positive one, displayed in his skill as a tragic poet: he asserts the dignity, worth, and value of humankind, as well as the mysterious and divine power that ordains the laws of the universe. Sophocles lived to be about 90, and died shortly after the death of his contemporary Euripides [q.v.], just before the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

Ajax *is generally considered to be the earliest of Sophocles' extant plays, written sometime between 450 and 440. The legendary events portrayed in this tragedy occurred between those covered in the* Iliad *and the* Odyssey, *during the period after the fall of Troy. Ajax and Odysseus have been contenders for the honor of receiving the arms of Achilles upon his death, but the arms have gone to Odysseus. In a frenzy of jealousy, Ajax has been driven temporarily insane; led by Athena into thinking they were the Greek generals who had insulted him, Ajax has tortured and slaughtered the army's*

livestock. The play opens the following morning: "In the darkness of night madness has seized/Our glorious Ajax: he is ruined and lost."

Now sane again, Ajax surveys what he has done, and the remainder of the first act follows his decision to kill himself, an act of shame and remorse. The heavily excerpted text here focuses on Ajax's decision, his friends' reflections on intervention in a suicide they see is coming, and the play's overriding sense that suicide is the outcome of a curse originating with the gods. The second half of the play, not included here, concerns the rather different question of what to do with Ajax's body after the suicide, and while there is extensive discussion of whether he merits a hero's burial, the fact that he was a suicide is not at issue. In the end, Odysseus, once his "worst foe," praises him as a brave man, among the noblest heroes, a friend.

The second, very brief selection is from Oedipus at Colonus, *Sophocles' last work and thought by many to be his greatest. It is the continuing tragedy of Oedipus' discovery that, without knowing their identities, he has slain his father Laius and married the newly widowed queen Jocasta, who is in fact his mother. In remorse, he has blinded himself. This passage from the chorus underscores the tragic drama that is unfolding in the play: it makes the case for not living too long, but returning "with all speed" whence one came.*

Source

Sophocles, "Ajax," tr. R. C. Trevelyan, and "Oedipus at Colonus," tr. R. C. Jebb, in *The Complete Greek Drama*, Vol. I, eds. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill Jr., New York: Random House, 1938, pp. 320, 324–327, 329–330, 333–334, 335–336, 338–342, 444, 654.

from AJAX

Tecmessa

Thou shalt hear all, as though thou hadst been present.
In the middle of the night, when the evening braziers
No longer flared, he took a two-edged sword,
And fain would sally upon an empty quest.
But I rebuked him, saying: "What doest thou,
Ajax? Why thus uncalled wouldst thou go forth?
No messenger has summoned thee, no trumpet
Roused thee. Nay, the whole camp is sleeping still."
But curtly he replied in well-worn phrase:
"Woman, silence is the grace of woman."
Thus schooled, I yielded; and he rushed out alone.
What passed outside the tent, I cannot tell.
But in he came, driving lashed together
Bulls, and shepherd dogs, and fleecy prey.
Some he beheaded, the wrenched-back throats of some
He slit, or cleft their chines; others he bound
And tortured, as though men they were, not beasts.

Last, darting through the doors, as to some phantom
He tossed words, now against the Atreidae, now
Taunting Odysseus, piling up huge jeers
Of how he had gone and wreaked his scorn upon them.
Soon he rushed back within the tent, where slowly
And hardly to his reason he returned.
And gazing round on the room filled with havoc,
He struck his head and cried out; then amidst
The wrecks of slaughtered sheep a wreck he fell,
And sat clutching his hair with tight-clenched nails.
There first for a long while he crouched speechless;
Then did he threaten me with fearful threats,
If I revealed not all that had befallen him,
Asking what meant the plight wherein he lay.
And I, friends, terror-stricken, told him all
That had been done, so far as I had knowledge.
Forthwith he broke forth into bitter wailing,
Such as I ne'er had heard from him before
For always had he held that such laments
Befitted cowards only, and low-souled men:
But uttering no shrill cries, he would express
His grief in low groans, as of a moaning bull.
But now prostrate beneath so great a woe,
Not tasting food nor drink, he sits among
The sword-slain beasts, motionless where he sank
And plainly he meditates some baleful deed,
For so portend his words and lamentations.
But, O friends!—'twas for this cause I came forth—
Enter and help, if help at all you can:
For by friends' words men so bestead are won.

Ajax (*chanting*)

Alas!
My shipmates and friends, you that alone to me
Loyal and true remain, of all friends alone,
Behold how great a billow lately rising from the storm of blood
Surging around engulphs me!

Ajax

Aiai! Who ever would have thought my name
Would harmonize so aptly with my woes?
For now well may I wail that sound out twice,
Yea thrice; such woeful destinies are mine,

Whose father from this land of Ida won
Fame's noblest guerdon over the whole host,
And crowned with praises only sailed back home;
But I, his son, who to the self-same Troy
Came after him, in might no less that he,
Nor rendering meaner service by my deeds,
Dishonoured by the Argives perish thus.
Yet this methinks I know for truth, were now
Achilles living and called on to adjudge
As the award of valour his own arms,
No man's hand would have grasped them before mine.

. . .

And what should I now do, who manifestly
To Heaven am hateful; whom the Greeks abhor,
Whom every Trojan hates, and this whole land?
Shall I desert the beached ships, and abandoning
The Atreidae, sail home o'er the Aegean Sea?
With what face shall I appear before my father
Telamon? . . .
. . . Some scheme let me devise
Which may prove to my aged sire that I,
His son, at least by nature am no coward.
For 'tis base for a man to crave long life
Who endures never-varying misery.
What joy can be in day that follows day,
Bringing us close then snatching us from death?
As of no worth would I esteem that man
Who warms himself with unsubstantial hopes.
Nobly to live, or else nobly to die
Befits proud birth. There is no more to say.

Tecmessa

O my lord Ajax, what are thou purposing?

Ajax

All things the long and countless lapse of time
Brings forth, displays, then hides once more in gloom.

. . .

. . . I will seek the meadows by the shore:
There will I wash and purge these stains, if so
I may appease Athena's heavy wrath.

Then will I find some lonely place, where I
May hide this sword, beyond all others cursed,
Buried where none may see it, deep in earth.

. . .

Therefore henceforth I study to obey
The Gods, and reverence the sons of Atreus.
Our rulers are they: we must yield. How else?
For to authority yield all things most dread
And mighty. Thus must Winter's snowy feet
Give place to Summer with her wealth of fruits;
And from her weary round doth Night withdraw,
That Day's white steeds may kindle heaven with light.
After fierce tempest calm will ever lull
The moaning sea; and Sleep, that masters all,
Binds life awhile, yet loosens soon the bond.
And who am I that I should not learn wisdom?

. . .

*Thus well am I resolved. (*To Tecmessa*) Thou, woman, pass*
Within, and pray gods that all things so
May be accomplished as my heart desires.
And you, friends, heed my wishes as she doth;
And when he comes, bid Teucer he must guard
My rights at need, and withal stand your friend.
For now I go whither I needs must pass.

. . .

This, O Zeus, I entreat thee, and likewise call
On Hermes, guide to the underworld, to lay me
Asleep without a struggle, at one swift bound,
When I have thrust my heart through with this sword.
Next I call on those maidens ever-living
And ever watchful of all human miseries,
The dread swift-striding Erinyes, that they mark
How by the Atreidae I have been destroyed:
And these vile men by a vile doom utterly
May they cut off, even as they see me here.
Come, O ye swift avenging Erinyes,
Spare not, touch with affliction the whole host.
And thou, whose chariot mounts up the steep sky,
Thou Sun, when on the land where I wan born
Thou shalt look down, check thy gold-spangled rein,
And announce my disasters and my doom
To my aged sire and her who nurtured me.

She, woeful woman, when she hears these tidings
Will wail out a loud dirge through all the town.
But I waste labour with this idle moan.
The act must now be done, and that with speed.
O Death, Death, come now and look upon me.
No, 'tis there I shall meet and speak to thee.
But thee, bright daylight which I now behold,
And Helios in his chariot I accost
For this last time of all, and then no more.
O sunlight! O thou hallowed soil, my own
Salamis, stablished seat of my sire's hearth,
And famous Athens, with thy kindred race,
And you, ye springs and streams, and Trojan plains,
Farewell, all ye who have sustained my life.
This is the last word Ajax speaks to you.
All else in Hades to the dead will I say.
(He falls on his sword)

Tecmessa

I am lost, destroyed, made desolate, my friends.

Leader

What is it? Speak.

Tecmessa

Ajax, our master, newly slaughtered lies
Yonder, a hidden sword sheathed in his body.

from OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Chorus

strophe
Whoso craves the ampler length of life, not content to desire a modest span, him will I judge with no uncertain voice; he cleaves to folly.

For the long days lay up full many things nearer unto grief than joy; but as for thy delights, their place shall know them no more, when a man's life hath lapsed beyond the fitting term; and the Deliverer comes at the last to all alike,—when the doom of Hades is suddenly revealed, without marriage-song, or lyre, or dance,—even Death at the last.

antistrophe

Not to be born is, past all prizing, best; but, when a man hath seen the light, this is next best by far, that with all speed he should go thither, whence he hath come.

For when he hath seen youth go by, with its light follies, what troublous affliction is strange to his lot, what suffering is not therein?—envy, factions, strife, battle and slaughters; and, last of all, age claims him for her own,—age, dispraised, infirm, unsociable, un-friended, with whom all woe of woe abides.

EURIPIDES
(c. 484–406 B.C.)

from *Suppliant Women: The Suicide of Evadne, Watched by her Father*

Euripides, the Greek dramatist, had a profound influence on the development of later Western drama. According to legend, he was born on the island of Salamis on September 23, 480 B.C., the day of the great naval battle in which the Greeks defeated the Persians; historians set his birthdate in 484. Euripides' family soon fled to Athens, where he received a comprehensive education before beginning military service at age 20. His first play was produced in 455, when he competed in the Festival of Dionysus, a competition Sophocles had won only 13 years prior to Euripides' initial entry. Euripides' first of four victories in the Festival came in 442. Euripides also showed talent and interest in other areas of study, particularly natural science and philosophy. Although he is believed to have written many dramatic works, only 17 tragedies and one satyr play survive today, among them Alcestis *(438),* Medea *(431),* Hippolytus *(428), and* The Trojan Women *(415). Throughout his dramatic career, Euripides was both praised and criticized for his unique and unconventional style, particularly the natural, realistic language of his heroes and his independence from traditional religious conventions; he is credited with bringing drama closer to the experience of the ordinary citizen. Aristotle called Euripides the most tragic of the Greek poets; he is sometimes called the philosopher of the stage. Euripides eventually became disaffected with life in Athens and moved to Macedonia, where he died in 406—according to legend, attacked and killed by the king's hunting dogs.*

In Suppliant Women *(date uncertain), Euripides depicts the tragic aftermath of a war known as the "Seven Against Thebes." In the drama, Evadne, whose husband Capaneus has died, commits suicide by throwing herself from a cliff onto his funeral pyre. Her elderly father Iphis witnesses her death and laments the torments of old age. Two cruxes in the text are often rendered in disparate ways in different translations: Iphis' vow to starve himself and destroy his body,* apophthero *["utterly ruin, destroy"], and his further insistence that the aged should not attempt to prolong their lives with various medical regimens but should leave and die, and "get out of the way of the young." Suicide in old age or to lessen burdens on younger generations is not, however, to be*

confused with that of younger people with more emotional reasons, and the chorus of Greek women in Suppliant Women *do not approve of Evadne's suicide, saying "Alas, woman, it is a dread deed you have accomplished."*

Source

Euripedes, *Suppliant Women*, lines 980–1113, ed. and tr. David Kovacs. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1998, odd-numbered pp. 110–125, some punctuation deleted.

from SUPPLIANT WOMEN: THE SUICIDE OF EVADNE, WATCHED BY HER FATHER

Chorus leader

Look, I see the resting place and consecrated tomb of Capaneus here and gifts from the temple Theseus has dedicated to the dead. I also see near at hand Evadne, the glorious wife of lightning-slain Capaneus and the daughter of King Iphis. Why does she take this path and stand on the high cliff that towers over this temple?

Evadne

What light, what gleam
did the sun on its chariot shine forth,
and likewise the moon, astride her steed,
swiftly accompanying my bridal celebration
through the dark night with her swift-moving torches?
On that day with songs sweet-resounding
in honor of my marriage the city of Argos
raised tower-high my happiness
and that of my bridegroom,
Capaneus of the bronze panoply.
And now it is to him I have come, running
crazed from my house
to enter upon the same
pyre blaze and burial,
to bring my toilsome life and its labors
to a toilless end in Hades.
The most pleasurable death, you know,
is to die with one's dearest as he dies,
if fate so ordains.

Chorus leader

You see this pyre, above which you stand, the storehouse of Zeus, where lies your husband, bested by the blaze of the thunderbolt.

Evadne

I see that my journey's end
is here where I stand (for fortune
is stepping along with me),
and it is here that to win glory
I shall launch myself from this cliff.
After leaping into the fire,
joining my body in the glowing flame
with my dear husband,
and laying my flesh near his.
I shall come to the marriage chamber of Persephone!
Never, where my life is concerned,
shall I abandon you lying dead beneath the earth!
Light the bridal torch, begin the marriage! May good luck
attend you, all lawful marriages
that may come to my children
in Argos! And may the wedded bridegroom,
as goodness ordains, dwell
fused in love to the pure impulse
of his noble wife!

Enter Iphis

Chorus leader

But look, here your father himself, aged Iphis, draws near to receive new and unwelcome tidings, tidings he did not know before and which will grieve him when he hears them.

Iphis

O unhappy women, unhappy old man that I am I have come with a double burden of grief for my kin: I want to transport my son Eteoclus, killed by the spears of the Cadmeans, back to his native land by ship and to find my daughter, Capaneus' wife, who sprang up and left her house, longing to die with her husband. Previously she was guarded closely in the house. But because of our present misfortunes I relaxed the watch, and she went off. But we think she is most likely to be here. Tell me if you have seen her.

Evadne

Why do you ask *them*? Here I am upon the cliff like a bird, perched high in my grief, father.

Iphis

My child, what impulse, what errand is this? Why have you stolen from home and come to this land?

Evadne

To learn my plans would make you angry, father. I do not want you to hear them.

Iphis

But is it not right for your father to know?

Evadne

You would be a foolish judge of my intent.

Iphis

But why have you adorned yourself with this finery?

Evadne

These clothes have a glorious aim, father.

Iphis

You do not look like a woman in mourning for her husband.

Evadne

No: it is for a new purpose that I am decked out.

Iphis

And yet you show yourself near his pyre and tomb?

Evadne

Yes: I have come here in glorious victory.

Iphis

What victory? I want to learn from your lips.

Evadne

Over all women the sun looks on.

Iphis

In the works of Athena or in prudence of thought?

Evadne

In goodness: I shall lie next to my husband in death.

Iphis

What do you mean? What is this diseased riddle you are telling?

Evadne

I shall leap upon the pyre of dead Capaneus here.

Iphis

My daughter, hush! Do not say this before the crowd.

Evadne

But this is the very thing I want, that all the Argives should know it.

Iphis

But I will not consent to your doing this.

Evadne

That makes no difference. You will not be able to seize me in your grasp. See, my body is sped: this is unkind to you but kind to me and to the husband with whom I share the pyre.

Evadne leaps

Chorus

Alas,
woman, it is a dread deed you have accomplished!

Iphis

My miserable life is at an end, Argive women!

Chorus

Ah, ah!
Cruel are the griefs you have suffered!
Can you bear, poor man, to look on this deed of utmost daring?

Iphis

You will never find another more hapless than me!

Chorus

Poor man!
You have taken a share, old sir, in the fortunes of Oedipus,
both you and my luckless city!

Iphis

Ah me! Why is it not possible for mortals to be twice young and twice old? If something is amiss at home, with our second thoughts we put it to rights, but we cannot do this with our lives. If we were twice young and old, when anyone made a mistake we could correct it when we had received our life's second portion.

I, for example, saw others begetting children and longed for them, and this longing was my undoing. If I had known this and had experienced what a thing it is for a father to lose his

children, I would never have come to my present pitch of misery. I begot and fathered a brave young man and now I am deprived of him.

Well, then, what am I to do in my misery? Return home? And then am I to look at the deep desolation of my house and the emptiness of my life? Or should I go to the house of Capaneus here? I loved to do so before when I had my daughter. But she is gone, she who always used to draw my cheek to her lips and hold my head in her hands. Nothing is sweeter to an aged father than a daughter. Sons are more spirited but not as endearing. Servants, take me swiftly home and hide me in the dark! There I shall starve my aged body and end my life! What good will it do me to touch the bones of my son?

Old age, so hard to wrestle with, how I detest you! I detest also those who wish to prolong their lives, using meat and drink and magic potions to turn aside the stream and avoid death. Since they do the earth no good, they should vanish and die and get out of the way of the young!

Exit Iphis

THE HIPPOCRATIC CORPUS (c. 450–c. 350 B.C.)

The Hippocratic Oath from *About Maidens*

Probably edited later at Alexandria, the body of medical works that has come to be known as the Hippocratic Corpus *includes about 70 works, all originally in the Ionic dialect, of differing rhetorical and teaching styles, most likely stemming from a variety of different authors during the last decades of the 5th century* B.C. *and the first half of the 4th century* B.C. *By tradition, they are attributed to the most renowned physician of the classical era, Hippocrates of Cos. These works established medicine as a discipline with its own methods and practices (particularly observation and experimentation) that were distinct from religion and philosophy. Hippocratic medicine saw illness as a natural process, an imbalance of the four "humors" or fluids of the body—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—and recognized that factors like diet, weather, and stress could influence health. In a famous passage in* The Art, *medicine is defined "in general terms" as "to do away with the sufferings of the sick, to lessen the violence of their diseases, and to refuse to treat those who are overmastered by their diseases, realizing that in such cases medicine is powerless."*

Very little is known about Hippocrates. Now revered as the "Father of Medicine," he was born around 460 B.C. *and lived on the Aegean island of Cos (Kos). By the time of Plato's* Phaedrus, *written in the early 4th century* B.C., *Hippocrates' fame had been established as a model physician: he was said to have been learned, humane, calm, pure of mind, grave, and reticent. The remains of the school and clinic attributed to Hippocrates are still visible on Cos. However, although he has at times been credited*

with authorship of most or all of the treatises forming the Corpus, *none have been proven to be his. He is almost certainly not the author of the oath still bearing his name or of the short treatise on maidens.*

In its original form, presented here, the "Hippocratic Oath" invokes the gods of healing, specifies the duties of the pupil toward his teacher and his teacher's family, and makes explicit the pupil's obligations in transmitting and using medical knowledge. It asserts a central principle: the physician shall come "for the benefit of the sick," that is, for the sake of the patient rather than to serve the interests of other parties. This and the companion principle "do no harm" are still understood as the normative core of the Oath, which also articulates a variety of specific rules concerning medical practice: it mandates the use of dietetic measures only (or what would now be called drug therapy); it prohibits the use of surgery (reserved for another profession); it prohibits abortion; and, central to the issue of suicide, it prohibits supplying lethal drugs to one's patients or to others.

Twentieth-century scholars like Ludwig Edelstein and Danielle Gourevitch have argued that the stringent ethics of this document do not accurately reflect the practice of medicine in 5th-century Greece, and are more likely a result of a later inclusion of differing philosophical ideals, principally Pythagorean religion. According to Edelstein (though not all scholars accept this view), at the time Hippocrates was writing, elective death, including both voluntary active euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, was widely accepted and practiced in Greek society as an option for those diagnosed as terminally ill. Taking poison was the most usual means of ending life in these circumstances. It was thought to be the responsibility of the physician, who was typically his own apothecary, to supply an appropriate and effective poison to a patient whose prognosis was irremediably dim; it is said that hemlock was developed for this purpose. Such a step involved consultation between the patient and the physician, or between the patient's family or friends and the physician; if the case was found to be hopeless, the physician might directly or indirectly suggest suicide. Whether to act upon such a suggestion, however, was left to the discretion of the patient. Thus the supplying of lethal poisons to patients upon request was not generally considered a violation of medical ethics; the Hippocratic Oath's prohibition of this practice represents, in Edelstein's view, the distinctive influence of Pythagoreanism.

"About Maidens" (peri parthenion), *one of several gynecological treatises in the Hippocratic Corpus and a diatribe against marginal religious healers, is an early attempt to formulate a physiological explanation of suicide. It also represents an early medical attempt to identify risk groups. The text is based on the clinical observation that women strangle (or hang) themselves more often than men if faced with the "sacred disease" (epilepsy) or paranoid forms of mental illness, a fact attributed to feminine cowardice ("the female nature is more fainthearted"). It focuses particularly on disturbances in the* parthenos *or "maiden" who is childless and unmarried but at the age for marriage, not long after menarche; the symptoms described in this text would now be called premenstrual dysphoric disorder. The Hippocratic writer offers a therapeutic recommendation: quick intercourse and pregnancy (rather than offerings to Artemis, called "The Strangled," the eternally virginal goddess). In this largely physiological explanation of suicide put forward in "About Maidens," however, there is little exploration of psychosocial factors associated with the social conditions of sequestration under which girls in ancient Greece lived.*

The "Hippocratic Oath" itself has had an erratic history. Although it was apparently used during ancient times, it was preserved primarily by Arabic scholars and not rediscovered in the West until translations of the Hippocratic Corpus appeared in the 11th century. Revised versions of the Oath are now administered in most U.S. medical schools (though fewer Canadian and British schools) upon the conferring of a medical degree. With very few exceptions, contemporary versions of the Oath taken by graduate physicians do not contain the original Greek version's explicit prohibitions of

taking fees for teaching, abortion, providing lethal drugs to dying patients, or surgery, though provisions concerning justice, social responsibility, and respect for life have often been introduced instead.

Sources

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THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panaceia and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art—if they desire to learn it—without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but to no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

from ABOUT MAIDENS

The beginning of medicine in my opinion is the constitution of the ever-existing. For it is not possible to know the nature of diseases, which indeed it is [the aim] of the art to discover, if you do not know the beginning in the undivided, from which it is divided out.

First about the so-called sacred disease, and about those who are stricken, and about terrors, all that men fear exceedingly so as to be out of their minds and to seem to have seen certain daimons hostile to them, either in the night or in the day or at both times. For from such a vision many already are strangled, more women than men; for the female nature is more fainthearted and lesser. But *parthenoi* [maidens] for whom it is the time of marriage, remaining unmarried, suffer this more at the time of the going down of the menses. Earlier they do not suffer these distresses, for it is later that the blood is collected in the womb so as to flow away. Whenever then the mouth of the exit is not opened for it, and more blood flows in because of nourishment and the growth of the body, at this time the blood, not having an outlet, bursts forth by reason of its magnitude into the heart and diaphragm. Whenever these are filled, the heart becomes sluggish; then from sluggishness comes torpor; then from torpor, madness. It is just as when someone sits for a long time, the blood from the hips and thighs, pressed out to the lower legs and feet, causes torpor, and from the torpor the feet become powerless for walking until the blood runs back to its own place; and it runs back quickest whenever, standing in cold water, you moisten the part up to the ankles. This torpor is not serious, for the blood quickly runs back on account of the straightness of the veins, and the part of the body is not critical. But from the heart and the diaphragm it runs back slowly, for the veins are at an angle, and the part is critical and disposed for derangement and mania. And whenever these parts are filled, shivering with fever starts up quickly; they call these fevers wandering. But when these things are thus, she is driven mad by the violent inflammation, and she is made murderous by the putrefaction, and she is fearful and anxious by reason of the gloom, and strangulations result from the pressure around the heart, and the spirit, distraught and anguished by reason of the badness of the blood, is drawn toward evil. And another thing, she addresses by name fearful things, and they order her to jump about and to fall down into wells and to be strangled, as if it were better and had every sort of advantage. And whenever they are without visions, there is a kind of pleasure the makes her desire death as if it were some sort of good. But when the woman returns to reason, women dedicate both many other things and the most expensive feminine clothing to Artemis, being utterly deceived, the soothsayers ordering it. Her deliverance [is] whenever nothing hinders the outflow of blood. But I myself bid maidens, whenever they suffer such things, to cohabit with men as quickly as possible, for if they conceive they become healthy. But if not, either immediately in the prime of youth, or a little later, she will be seized [by this illness], if not by some other illness. And of married women, those who are sterile suffer this more often.

PLATO
(c. 424–c. 348 B.C.)

Apology: Socrates on Being Condemned to Death **(expanded in Archive)**

Phaedo: The Death of Socrates **(expanded in Archive)**

Republic: On Medicine **(expanded in Archive)**

Laws: Recidivist Criminals and Penalties for Suicide **(expanded in Archive)**

Plato was born in Athens into an aristocratic family during the Peloponnesian War, in the waning years of Greece's golden age, when Athens was in decline after having been the cultural, political, and military center of Greece. According to an ancient story, his original name was Aristocles; he was given the surname Plato (Greek for "broad" or "wide") because of his broad shoulders, or, in other versions, broad forehead or wide range of knowledge. Plato's principal teacher, Socrates, to whom he later gave the role of philosophical protagonist in his early and middle-period Dialogues*, was unjustly convicted and sentenced to death by a democratic government in 399 B.C.; this would later be of central influence in Plato's* Dialogues*, especially the* Apology *and* Crito*, and the monumental philosophical work* The Republic. *In the years after Socrates' death, Plato traveled widely. In about 387, after returning to Athens, he founded the Academy, a center of philosophical and mathematical learning; Aristotle [q.v.], Plato's student, was one of the Academy's many pupils. Plato also traveled on several occasions to Syracuse, where he sought to persuade Dion, the son-in-law of the tyrant Dionysus I, and later Dionysus II, of the importance of the idea of the philosopher-king. Plato died in Athens.*

Plato's well-known Theory of Ideas, or Forms, is the foundation of his dualistic metaphysics. It recognizes two domains, the realm of material objects perceived by the senses and the realm of unchanging, transcendent entities (Ideas, or Forms) that are the eternal truths. Only Ideas are true objects of knowledge; material existence, known by sense-perception, is illusory and can be the subject of opinion only. The philosopher, by reason and contemplation, can come to know the Ideas and thereby achieve true knowledge.

The first two selections are taken from the Apology *and* Phaedo. *When in 399 Socrates was convicted on charges of "not believing in the Gods the State believes in" and "corrupting the youth" by encouraging them to challenge conventional wisdom, he was offered the chance to set his own penalty, but he chose one calculated to irritate the court and so was not set free. In the* Apology, *Plato offers Socrates' defense of this choice: "the difficulty is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness." Then, in the month intervening between trial and execution, Socrates could have escaped from jail and again could have saved his own life; he chose not to do so. Describing Socrates' life—and death—in these and other dialogues, Plato portrays Socrates as arguing that there is no contradiction in his submitting freely to death and holding the belief that suicide is forbidden. Plato portrays Socrates'*

final conversation as taking place on the day he is to be executed, just before the jailor brings the lethal bowl of hemlock. The section presented here opens as Socrates sends a message to Evenus to "come after me as quickly as he can," that is, as Cebes interprets it, to die as soon as possible. The resultant conversation explores the distinctions between "engaging in philosophy," or, as Socrates puts it, "practising nothing other than dying and being dead." In this passage and the subsequent discussion of death and immortality, of inestimable influence in later religious and philosophical thought in the West, Plato is exploring his view that death will bring independence from sense-perception, the body, the material world, and thus will be welcome to the philosopher in search of fully abstract truth. After this discussion, the selection presented resumes with Plato's description of Socrates' final actions as he asks for the cup of hemlock and drinks it. Whether this act itself is a suicide or not has been widely discussed in later literature.

In The Republic *Plato explores issues of justice and the ideal form of state. He envisions a utopia where wise philosopher-kings rule and where the balance of faculties in the just individual, where the appetites and emotions are regulated by the intellect, is mirrored in the structure of the state, where the workers and the military are governed by the philosophically just and principled guardians. Against this background,* The Republic *depicts Socrates conversing with Glaucon about the appropriate role of the physician in the ideal state. The physician, Socrates holds, should treat only acute illness and wounds from which the patient can recover fully enough to return to his work, but there should be no coddling of chronic disease. The man who is sickly or who destroys his own health should recognize that he is "of no use either to himself or the state"; he is not to be given treatment, but allowed to die. Significantly, the obligation is on the patient to decline treatment, rather than on the physician to refrain from providing it; in this indirect sense, the patient is to bring about his own death if he can no longer work.*

Plato continued to explore issues of individual responsibility and utility to society in his second treatise attempting to depict a just state, The Laws. *In the first passage from* The Laws presented here, *the Laws themselves appear to recommend suicide, or voluntary subjection to capital punishment, for the recidivist criminal unable to control his behavior: here, having one's life end is seen as obligatory, though it is not clear whether this is to be brought about by the person himself or by some other party, or whether this is a matter of indifference. In the second passage, Plato asks what penalties should be imposed by the just state for homicide and suicide. He recommends separate burial for the suicide, as was the case in Greek custom, but he also identifies circumstances in which penalties are not to be imposed: judicial execution, disgrace, and the "stress of cruel and inevitable calamity." Sloth—he may mean what is now understood as depression—and "want of manliness" or cowardice are identified as conditions in which burial penalties for suicide are to be imposed, though even here the penalties are much less severe than those for murder. Some commentators have seen in Plato's discussion a nascent distinction between rational and irrational suicide, or suicide with and without good reason.*

Sources

The Dialogues of Plato, Apology, 38C-42A; Phaedo 61B-69E, 116A-118A; Republic III 405A-410A; Laws IX 853A-854D, 862D-863A, 872D-873E, tr. Benjamin Jowett, New York: Random House, 1892, 1920, Vol. I, pp. 444–453, 499–501; 669–674; Vol. II, pp. 599–600, 608, 617–618, available online at www.gutenberg,org from Project Gutenberg; www.constitution.org from the Constitution Society; classics.mit.edu from the Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, respectively.

from APOLOGY: SOCRATES ON BEING CONDEMNED TO DEATH

. . . Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man; for they will call me wise, even although I am not wise, when they want to reproach you. If you had waited a little while, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and not far from death. I am speaking now not to all of you, but only to those who have condemned me to death.

. . . The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death. I am old and move slowly, and the slower runner has overtaken me, and my accusers are keen and quick, and the faster runner, who is unrighteousness, has overtaken them. And now I depart hence condemned by you to suffer the penalty of death,—they too go their ways condemned by the truth to suffer the penalty of villainy and wrong; and I must abide by my award—let them abide by theirs. I suppose that these things may be regarded as fated,—and I think that they are well.

And now, O men who have condemned me, I would fain prophesy to you; for I am about to die, and in the hour of death men are gifted with prophetic power. . . .If you think that by killing men you can prevent some one from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honourable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves. This is the prophecy which I utter before my departure to the judges who have condemned me.

Friends, who would have acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about the thing which has come to pass, while the magistrates are busy, and before I go to the place at which I must die. Stay then a little, for we may as well talk with one another while there is time. You are my friends, and I should like to show you the meaning of this event which has happened to me. O my judges—for you I may truly call judges—I should like to tell you of a wonderful circumstance. Hitherto the divine faculty of which the internal oracle is the source has constantly been in the habit of opposing me even about trifles, if I was going to make a slip or error in any matter; and now as you see there has come upon me that which may be thought, and is generally believed to be, the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition, either when I was leaving my house in the morning, or when I was on my way to the court, or while I was speaking, at anything which I was going to say; and yet I have often been stopped in the middle of a speech, but now in nothing I either said or did touching the matter in hand has the oracle opposed me. What do I take to be the explanation of this silence? I will tell you. It is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. For the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good.

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. . . . Now if

death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. . . . Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. . . . In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not.

. . .Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that the time had arrived when it was better for me to die and be released from trouble; wherefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason, also, I am not angry with my condemners, or with my accusers; they have done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

. . . The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.

from PHAEDO: THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

. . . Tell this to Evenus, Cebes, and bid him be of good cheer; say that I would have him come after me if he be a wise man, and not tarry; and that to-day I am likely to be going, for the Athenians say that I must.

Simmias said: What a message for such a man! having been a frequent companion of his I should say that, as far as I know him, he will never take your advice unless he is obliged.

Why, said Socrates,—is not Evenus a philosopher?

I think that he is, said Simmias.

Then he, or any man who has the spirit of philosophy, will be willing to die, but he will not take his own life, for that is held to be unlawful.

Here he changed his position, and put his legs off the couch on to the ground, and during the rest of the conversation he remained sitting.

Why do you say, enquired Cebes, that a man ought not to take his own life, but that the philosopher will be ready to follow the dying?

Socrates replied: And have you, Cebes and Simmias, who are the disciples of Philolaus, never heard him speak of this?

Yes, but his language was obscure, Socrates.

My words, too, are only an echo; but there is no reason why I should not repeat what I have heard: and indeed, as I am going to another place, it is very meet for me to be thinking and talking of the nature of the pilgrimage which I am about to make. What can I do better in the interval between this and the setting of the sun?

Then tell me, Socrates, why is suicide held to be unlawful? as I have certainly heard Philolaus, about whom you were just now asking, affirm when he was staying with us at Thebes: and there are others who say the same, although I have never understood what was meant by any of them.

Do not lose heart, replied Socrates, and the day may come when you will understand. I suppose that you wonder why, when other things which are evil may be good at certain times and to certain persons, death is to be the only exception, and why, when a man is better dead, he is not permitted to be his own benefactor, but must wait for the hand of another.

Very true, said Cebes, laughing gently and speaking in his native Boeotian.

I admit the appearance of inconsistency in what I am saying; but there may not be any real inconsistency after all. There is a doctrine whispered in secret that man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door and run away; this is a great mystery which I do not quite understand. Yet I too believe that the gods are our guardians, and that we are a possession of theirs. Do you not agree?

Yes, I quite agree, said Cebes.

And if one of your own possessions, an ox or an ass, for example, took the liberty of putting himself out of the way when you had given no intimation of your wish that he should die, would you not be angry with him, and would you not punish him if you could?

Certainly, replied Cebes.

Then, if we look at the matter thus, there may be reason in saying that a man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him, as he is now summoning me.

Yes, Socrates, said Cebes, there seems to be truth in what you say. And yet how can you reconcile this seemingly true belief that God is our guardian and we his possessions, with the willingness to die which we were just now attributing to the philosopher? That the wisest of men should be willing to leave a service in which they are ruled by the gods who are the best of rulers, is not reasonable; for surely no wise man thinks that when set at liberty he can take better care of himself than the gods take of him. A fool may perhaps think so—he may argue that he had better run away from his master, not considering that his duty is to remain to the end, and not to run away from the good, and that there would be no sense in his running away. The wise man will want to be ever with him who is better than himself. Now this, Socrates, is the reverse of what was just now said; for upon this view the wise man should sorrow and the fool rejoice at passing out of life.

The earnestness of Cebes seemed to please Socrates. Here, said he, turning to us, is a man who is always inquiring, and is not so easily convinced by the first thing which he hears.

And certainly, added Simmias, the objection which he is now making does appear to me to have some force. For what can be the meaning of a truly wise man wanting to fly away and lightly leave a master who is better than himself? And I rather imagine that Cebes is referring to you; he thinks that you are too ready to leave us, and too ready to leave the gods whom you acknowledge to be our good masters.

Yes, replied Socrates; there is reason in what you say. And so you think that I ought to answer your indictment as if I were in a court?

We should like you to do so, said Simmias.

Then I must try to make a more successful defence before you than I did when before the judges. For I am quite ready to admit, Simmias and Cebes, that I ought to be grieved at death, if I were not persuaded in the first place that I am going to other gods who are wise and good

(of which I am as certain as I can be of any such matters), and secondly (though I am not so sure of this last) to men departed, better than those whom I leave behind; and therefore I do not grieve as I might have done, for I have good hope that there is yet something remaining for the dead, and as has been said of old, some far better thing for the good than for the evil.

But do you mean to take away your thoughts with you, Socrates? said Simmias. Will you not impart them to us?—for they are a benefit in which we too are entitled to share. Moreover, if you succeed in convincing us, that will be an answer to the charge against yourself.

I will do my best, replied Socrates. But you must first let me hear what Crito wants; he has long been wishing to say something to me.

Only this, Socrates, replied Crito:—the attendant who is to give you the poison has been telling me, and he wants me to tell you, that you are not to talk much, talking, he says, increases heat, and this is apt to interfere with the action of the poison; persons who excite themselves are sometimes obliged to take a second or even a third dose.

Then, said Socrates, let him mind his business and be prepared to give the poison twice or even thrice if necessary; that is all.

I knew quite well what you would say, replied Crito; but I was obliged to satisfy him.

Never mind him, he said.

And now, O my judges, I desire to prove to you that the real philosopher has reason to be of good cheer when he is about to die, and that after death he may hope to obtain the greatest good in the other world. And how this may be, Simmias and Cebes, I will endeavour to explain. For I deem that the true votary of philosophy is likely to be misunderstood by other men; they do not perceive that he is always pursuing death and dying; and if this be so, and he has had the desire of death all his life long, why when his time comes should he repine at that which he has been always pursuing and desiring?

Simmias said laughingly: Though not in a laughing humour, you have made me laugh, Socrates; for I cannot help thinking that the many when they hear your words will say how truly you have described philosophers, and our people at home will likewise say that the life which philosophers desire is in reality death, and that they have found them out to be deserving of the death which they desire.

And they are right, Simmias, in thinking so, with the exception of the words 'they have found them out'; for they have not found out either what is the nature of that death which the true philosopher deserves, or how he deserves or desires death. But enough of them:—let us discuss the matter among ourselves: Do we believe that there is such a thing as death?

To be sure, replied Simmias.

Is it not the separation of soul and body? And to be dead is the completion of this; when the soul exists in herself, and is released from the body and the body is released from the soul, what is this but death?

Just so, he replied.

There is another question, which will probably throw light on our present inquiry if you and I can agree about it:—Ought the philosopher to care about the pleasures—if they are to be called pleasures—of eating and drinking?

Certainly not, answered Simmias.

And what about the pleasures of love—should he care for them?

By no means.

And will he think much of the other ways of indulging the body, for example, the acquisition of costly raiment, or sandals, or other adornments of the body? Instead of caring about them, does he not rather despise anything more than nature needs? What do you say?

I should say that the true philosopher would despise them.

Would you not say that he is entirely concerned with the soul and not with the body? He would like, as far as he can, to get away from the body and to turn to the soul.

Quite true.

In matters of this sort philosophers, above all other men, may be observed in every sort of way to dissever the soul from the communion of the body.

Very true.

Whereas, Simmias, the rest of the world are of opinion that to him who has no sense of pleasure and no part in bodily pleasure, life is not worth having; and that he who is indifferent about them is as good as dead.

That is also true.

What again shall we say of the actual acquirement of knowledge? —is the body, if invited to share in the enquiry, a hinderer or a helper? I mean to say, have sight and hearing any truth in them? Are they not, as the poets are always telling us, inaccurate witnesses? and yet, if even they are inaccurate and indistinct, what is to be said of the other senses?—for you will allow that they are the best of them?

Certainly, he replied.

Then when does the soul attain truth?—for in attempting to consider anything in company with the body she is obviously deceived.

True.

Then must not true existence be revealed to her in thought, if at all?

Yes.

And thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her—neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure,—when she takes leave of the body, and has as little as possible to do with it, when she has no bodily sense or desire, but is aspiring after true being?

Certainly.

And in this the philosopher dishonours the body; his soul runs away from his body and desires to be alone and by herself?

That is true.

Well, but there is another thing, Simmias: Is there or is there not an absolute justice?

Assuredly there is.

And an absolute beauty and absolute good?

Of course.

But did you ever behold any of them with your eyes?

Certainly not.

Or did you ever reach them with any other bodily sense?—and I speak not of these alone, but of absolute greatness, and health, and strength, and of the essence or true nature of everything. Has the reality of them ever been perceived by you through the bodily organs? or rather, is not the nearest approach to the knowledge of their several natures made by him who so orders his intellectual vision as to have the most exact conception of the essence of each thing which he considers?

Certainly.

And he attains to the purest knowledge of them who goes to each with the mind alone, not introducing or intruding in the act of thought sight or any other sense together with reason, but with the very light of the mind in her own clearness searches into the very truth of each; he who has got rid, as far as he can, of eyes and ears and, so to speak, of the whole body, these being in his opinion distracting elements which when they infect the soul hinder her from acquiring truth and knowledge—who, if not he, is likely to attain the knowledge of true being?

What you say has a wonderful truth in it, Socrates, replied Simmias.

And when real philosophers consider all these things, will they not be led to make a reflection which they will express in words something like the following? 'Have we not found,' they will say, 'a path of thought which seems to bring us and our argument to the conclusion, that while we are in the body, and while the soul is infected with the evils of the body, our desire will not be satisfied? and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all. Whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? whence but from the body and the lusts of the body? wars are occasioned by the love of money, and money has to be acquired for the sake and in the service of the body; and by reason of all these impediments we have no time to give to philosophy; and, last and worst of all, even if we are at leisure and betake ourselves to some speculation, the body is always breaking in upon us, causing turmoil and confusion in our enquiries, and so amazing us that we are prevented from seeing the truth. It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body—the soul in herself must behold things in themselves: and then we shall attain the wisdom which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers, not while we live, but after death; for if while in company with the body, the soul cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things follows—either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death. For then, and not till then, the soul will be parted from the body and exist in herself alone. In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of truth.'

. . . Wherefore, I say, let a man be of good cheer about his soul, who having cast away the pleasures and ornaments of the body as alien to him and working harm rather than good, has sought after the pleasures of knowledge; and has arrayed the soul, not in some foreign attire, but in her own proper jewels, temperance, and justice, and courage, and nobility, and truth—in these adorned she is ready to go on her journey to the world below, when her hour comes. You, Simmias and Cebes, and all other men, will depart at some time or other. Me already, as the tragic poet would say, the voice of fate calls. Soon I must drink the poison. . . .

. . . When he had spoken these words, he arose and went into a chamber to bathe; Crito followed him and told us to wait. So we remained behind, talking and thinking of the subject of discourse, and also of the greatness of our sorrow; he was like a father of whom we were being bereaved, and we were about to pass the rest of our lives as orphans. When he had taken the bath his children were brought to him—(he had two young sons and an elder one); and the

women of his family also came, and he talked to them and gave them a few directions in the presence of Crito; then he dismissed them and returned to us.

Now the hour of sunset was near, for a good deal of time had passed while he was within. When he came out, he sat down with us again after his bath, but not much was said. Soon the jailer, who was the servant of the Eleven, entered and stood by him, saying:—To you, Socrates, whom I know to be the noblest and gentlest and best of all who ever came to this place, I will not impute the angry feelings of other men, who rage and swear at me, when, in obedience to the authorities, I bid them drink the poison—indeed, I am sure that you will not be angry with me; for others, as you are aware, and not I, are to blame. And so fare you well, and try to bear lightly what must needs be—you know my errand. Then bursting into tears he turned away and went out.

Socrates looked at him and said: I return your good wishes, and will do as you bid. Then turning to us, he said, How charming the man is: since I have been in prison he has always been coming to see me, and at times he would talk to me, and was as good to me as could be, and now see how generously he sorrows on my account. We must do as he says, Crito; and therefore let the cup be brought, if the poison is prepared: if not, let the attendant prepare some.

. . . Crito made a sign to the servant, who was standing by; and he went out, and having been absent for some time, returned with the jailer carrying the cup of poison. Socrates said: You, my good friend, who are experienced in these matters, shall give me directions how I am to proceed. The man answered: You have only to walk about until your legs are heavy, and then to lie down, and the poison will act. At the same time he handed the cup to Socrates, who in the easiest and gentlest manner, without the least fear or change of colour or feature, looking at the man with all his eyes, Echecrates, as his manner was, took the cup and said: What do you say about making a libation out of this cup to any god? May I, or not? The man answered: We only prepare, Socrates, just so much as we deem enough. I understand, he said: but I may and must ask the gods to prosper my journey from this to the other world—even so—and so be it according to my prayer. Then raising the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drank off the poison. And hitherto most of us had been able to control our sorrow; but now when we saw him drinking, and saw too that he had finished the draught, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept, not for him, but at the thought of my own calamity in having to part from such a friend. Nor was I the first; for Crito, when he found himself unable to restrain his tears, had got up, and I followed; and at that moment, Apollodorus, who had been weeping all the time, broke out in a loud and passionate cry which made cowards of us all. Socrates alone retained his calmness: What is this strange outcry? he said. I sent away the women mainly in order that they might not misbehave in this way, for I have been told that a man should die in peace. Be quiet, then, and have patience. When we heard his words we were ashamed, and refrained our tears; and he walked about until, as he said, his legs began to fail, and then he lay on his back, according to the directions, and the man who gave him the poison now and then looked at his feet and legs; and after a while he pressed his foot hard, and asked him if he could feel; and he said, No; and then his leg, and so upwards and upwards, and showed us that he was cold and stiff. And he felt them himself, and said: When the poison reaches the heart, that will be the end. He was beginning to grow cold about the groin, when he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said—they were his last words—he said: Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?

The debt shall be paid, said Crito; is there anything else? There was no answer to this question; but in a minute or two a movement was heard, and the attendants uncovered him; his eyes were set, and Crito closed his eyes and mouth.

Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend; concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best.

from REPUBLIC: BOOK III

. . . when intemperance and disease multiply in a State, halls of justice and medicine are always being opened; and the arts of the doctor and the lawyer give themselves airs, finding how keen is the interest which not only the slaves but the freemen of a city take about them.

Of course.

And yet what greater proof can there be of a bad and disgraceful state of education than this, that not only artisans and the meaner sort of people need the skill of first-rate physicians and judges, but also those who would profess to have had a liberal education?

. . . Well, I said, and to require the help of medicine, not when a wound has to be cured, or on occasion of an epidemic, but just because, by indolence and a habit of life such as we have been describing, men fill themselves with waters and winds, as if their bodies were a marsh, compelling the ingenious sons of Asclepius to find more names for diseases, such as flatulence and catarrh; is not this, too, a disgrace?

Yes, he said, they do certainly give very strange and newfangled names to

Diseases . . .

. . . in former days, as is commonly said, before the time of Herodicus, the guild of Asclepius did not practise our present system of medicine, which may be said to educate diseases. But Herodicus, being a trainer, and himself of a sickly constitution, by a combination of training and doctoring found out a way of torturing first and chiefly himself, and secondly the rest of the world.

How was that? he said.

By the invention of lingering death; for he had a mortal disease which he perpetually tended, and as recovery was out of the question, he passed his entire life as a valetudinarian; he could do nothing but attend upon himself, and he was in constant torment whenever he departed in anything from his usual regimen, and so dying hard, by the help of science he struggled on to old age.

A rare reward of his skill!

Yes, I said; a reward which a man might fairly expect who never understood that, if Asclepius did not instruct his descendants in valetudinarian arts, the omission arose, not from ignorance or inexperience of such a branch of medicine, but because he knew that in all well-ordered states every individual has an occupation to which he must attend, and has therefore no leisure to spend in continually being ill. This we remark in the case of the artisan, but, ludicrously enough, do not apply the same rule to people of the richer sort.

How do you mean? he said.

I mean this: When a carpenter is ill he asks the physician for a rough and ready cure; an emetic or a purge or a cautery or the knife, and these are his remedies. And if some one

prescribes for him a course of dietetics, and tells him that he must swathe and swaddle his head, and all that sort of thing, he replies at once that he has no time to be ill, and that he sees no good in a life which is spent in nursing his disease to the neglect of his customary employment; and therefore bidding good-bye to this sort of physician, he resumes his ordinary habits, and either gets well and lives and does his business, or, if his constitution falls, he dies and has no more trouble.

Yes, he said, and a man in his condition of life ought to use the art of medicine thus far only.

. . . And therefore our politic Asclepius may be supposed to have exhibited the power of his art only to persons who, being generally of healthy constitution and habits of life, had a definite ailment; such as these he cured by purges and operations, and bade them live as usual, herein consulting the interests of the State; but bodies which disease had penetrated through and through he would not have attempted to cure by gradual processes of evacuation and infusion: he did not want to lengthen out good-for-nothing lives, or to have weak fathers begetting weaker sons; and if a man was not able to live in the ordinary way he had no business to cure him; for such a cure would have been of no use either to himself, or to the State.

. . . This is the sort of medicine, and this is the sort of law, which you sanction in your State. They will minister to better natures, giving health both of soul and of body; but those who are diseased in their bodies they will leave to die, and the corrupt and incurable souls they will put an end to themselves. That is clearly the best thing both for the patients and for the State.

from LAWS

. . . Athenian Stranger. There is a sense of disgrace in legislating, as we are about to do, for all the details of crime in a state which, as we say, is to be well regulated and will be perfectly adapted to the practice of virtue . . .

. . . not without a provident eye to the weakness of human nature generally, I will proclaim the law about robbers of temples and similar incurable, or almost incurable, criminals. Having already agreed that such enactments ought always to have a short prelude, we may speak to the criminal, whom some tormenting desire by night and by day tempts to go and rob a temple, the fewest possible words of admonition and exhortation:--O sir, we will say to him, the impulse which moves you to rob temples is not an ordinary human malady, nor yet a visitation of heaven, but a madness which is begotten in a man from ancient and unexpiated crimes of his race, an ever-recurring curse;-against this you must guard with all your might, and how you are to guard we will explain to you. When any such thought comes into your mind, go and perform expiations, go as a suppliant to the temples of the Gods who avert evils, go to the society of those who are called good men among you; hear them tell and yourself try to repeat after them, that every man should honour the noble and the just. Fly from the company of the wicked--fly and turn not back; and if your disorder is lightened by these remedies, well and good, but if not, then acknowledge death to be nobler than life, and depart hence. . . .

. . .When any one commits any injustice, small or great, the law will admonish and compel him either never at all to do the like again, or never voluntarily, or at any rate in a far less degree;

and he must in addition pay for the hurt. Whether the end is to be attained by word or action, with pleasure or pain, by giving or taking away privileges, by means of fines or gifts, or in whatsoever way the law shall proceed to make a man hate injustice, and love or not hate the nature of the just-this is quite the noblest work of law. But if the legislator sees any one who is incurable, for him he will appoint a law and a penalty. He knows quite well that to such men themselves there is no profit in the continuance of their lives, and that they would do a double good to the rest of mankind if they would take their departure, inasmuch as they would be an example to other men not to offend, and they would relieve the city of bad citizens. In such cases, and in such cases only, the legislator ought to inflict death as the punishment of offences . . .

. . . There are things about which it is terrible and unpleasant to legislate, but impossible not to legislate.

. . . And what shall he suffer who slays him who of all men, as they say, is his own best friend? I mean the suicide, who deprives himself by violence of his appointed share of life, not because the law of the state requires him, nor yet under the compulsion of some painful and inevitable misfortune which has come upon him, nor because he has had to suffer from irremediable and intolerable shame, but who from sloth or want of manliness imposes upon himself an unjust penalty. For him, what ceremonies there are to be of purification and burial God knows, and about these the next of kin should enquire of the interpreters and of the laws thereto relating, and do according to their injunctions. They who meet their death in this way shall be buried alone, and none shall be laid by their side; they shall be buried ingloriously in the borders of the twelve portions the land, in such places as are uncultivated and nameless, and no column or inscription shall mark the place of their interment.

ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.)

from *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher and scientist, was born in Macedonia. He moved to Athens at about age 17 or 18 and became a student of philosophy under the tutelage of Plato. He remained in Athens for the next 20 years, where he continued his studies and became a teacher at Plato's Academy. With the death of Plato in 347 B.C., Aristotle traveled to Asia Minor and counseled the ruler Hermias. He married Hermias' adopted daughter Pythias, but was forced to flee to Lesbos, where he carried out research in zoology and marine biology, when Hermias was seized and executed by the Persians. In 343 or 342, Aristotle was called to Macedonia, where he tutored Philip II of Macedon's son Alexander, who would later be known as Alexander the Great. About the time Alexander became ruler in Macedonia, Aristotle returned to Athens and founded his own school, the Lyceum, which for the next decade served as the center of Aristotle's explorations into virtually every field of inquiry. In 323, following the death of Alexander, an anti-Macedonian movement

gained power in Athens, and Aristotle was forced to retire to a family-owned estate in Euboea, where he died a year later.

Very few of Aristotle's own writings survive today, although a large corpus of his lecture notes, most likely delivered orally and written down by students, exists in an edited arrangement prepared by the first-century B.C. *editor Andronicus. This extensive body of thought includes treatments of almost all branches of philosophy, politics, and art. Some of the best known of these works are* Physics, Metaphysics, On the Soul, Politics, Poetics, *and the* Nicomachean Ethics, *dedicated to his son Nicomachus.*

The Nicomachean Ethics, *from which the selection in this volume is taken, is an exploration of the virtues of intellect and characte in relationship to happiness. In it, Aristotle formulates what is called the doctrine of the mean as applicable to virtues of character, exhibited in behavior: one should try to achieve the "mean" between opposing excesses. For example, to achieve the ideal of courage, one should try to seek the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness, a mean modified by one's circumstances but nevertheless functioning as an intermediate between extremes. In this discussion of courage, from which the first selection is taken, Aristotle maintains that committing suicide to avoid pain or other undesirable circumstances is a cowardly act. In a later chapter, he further argues that suicide is unlawful and is an act committed against the interests of the state.*

Source

Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, Book III, vii. 5–13, 1115a-1116a; Book V, xi, 1138a, ed. and tr. W. D. Ross. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1925, pp. 155–163, 317–319.

from NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

. . . it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs. . .

The coward . . . is a despairing sort of person; for he fears everything. The brave man, on the other hand, has the opposite disposition; for confidence is the mark of a hopeful disposition. The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently disposed towards them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right, position; and rash men are precipitate, and wish for dangers beforehand but draw back when they are in them, while brave men are keen in the moment of action, but quiet beforehand.

As we have said, then, courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so. But to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil. . . .

* * *

Whether a man can treat himself unjustly or not, is evident from what has been said. For (a) one class of just acts are those acts in accordance with any virtue which are prescribed by the law; e.g. the law does not expressly permit suicide, and what it does not expressly permit it forbids. Again, when a man in violation of the law harms another (otherwise than in retaliation)

voluntarily, he acts unjustly, and a voluntary agent is one who knows both the person he is affecting by his action and the instrument he is using; and he who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to the right rule of life, and this the law does not allow; therefore he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the state, not towards himself. For he suffers voluntarily, but no one is voluntarily treated unjustly. This is also the reason why the state punishes; a certain loss of civil rights attaches to the man who destroys himself, on the ground that he is treating the state unjustly.

MENCIUS
(c. 372–c. 289 B.C.)

from *The Mencius*

Meng Ke, the Chinese Confucian philosopher whose honorific name Mengzi (Meng-tzu) is Latinized as "Mencius," was, like Confucius [q.v.], born in what is now Shandong province. Also like Confucius, Mencius' profession was primarily teaching; he is said to have studied under a pupil of the grandson of Confucius, Zisi (according to tradition, he studied under Zisi himself). Mencius lived during the Warring States period, a time of considerable political corruption and dictatorial rule, and traveled for about 40 years from one state to another attempting to persuade rulers of the need for reform and how to accomplish it. He also served as a scholar and official at the Jixia Academy in the state of Qi, but took a three-year absence for mourning after the death of his mother, and was revered for this expression of filial piety.

Respected as one of its principal interpreters, Mencius developed an intuitionist form of Confucianism. Mencius expands Confucius's humanism by maintaining that human nature is originally and intrinsically good, though it may be corrupted by negative societal influences. The Mencius, *said to be a record of his conversations with kings during his years of itinerant travel, was probably compiled by Mencius' pupils after his death. Together with the* Analects *of Confucius and two other classic texts, Mencius' work served as the basis of the imperial civil service examinations.*

Although Mencius does not explore the issue of suicide explicitly, the famous passage traditionally translated "I like fish and I also like bear's paw" shows that there are occasions on which one may not—indeed should not—attempt to preserve one's own life, but should sacrifice it for a greater good, righteousness. The bear's paw, or bear's palm, passage is often compared with Confucius' Analects, *15.9 and exhibits some of the same tensions over obligations to sacrifice one's life yet also preserve one's body.*

Sources

The Book of Mencius, Book VI, Part A, 10, tr. Eirik Lang Harris. Some interpretive material concerning the traditional "bear's paw" phrase is found in Wing-Tsit Chan, tr. and ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, 6A10, 6A14-6A15, pp. 57–59. Interpretive material also from Eirik Lang Harris.

from THE MENCIUS

Mencius said: "Fish is something I desire. Bear paw is also something I desire. But if I cannot have them both, I would give up the fish and choose the bear paw. Life is something I desire. Righteousness is also something I desire. But if I cannot have them both, I would give up life and choose righteousness. Life is something that I desire, but there is something that I desire more than life, and so I will not be unscrupulous in pursuing life. Death is something that I hate, but there is something that I hate more than death, and so there are perils that I will not avoid. If it were such that there was nothing that one desired more than life, then, if there were some means that would help one continue living, what would one not use? If it were such that there was nothing that one hated more than death, then if there were some means that would help one avoid peril, what would one not do? From this, then, we see that there are means of staying alive that will not be employed and also that there are means for avoiding peril that will not be used. Therefore, there are desires that are greater than the desire for life and hatreds greater than the hatred of death. It is not merely the sage who has this heart; people all have it, it is just that the sage never loses it.

"Consider the case where, if one gets a [single] basket of food and a bowl of stew, one will live, if one does not get them, one will die. However, if they are insultingly provided, even travelers on the road would not accept them. If they are trampled upon and then provided, even a beggar would disdain them. Yet when it comes to a salary of ten thousand measures of grain, one accepts it without regard to ritual and righteousness. What does this salary add to one? Should one accept for the sake of a beautiful estate? For the respect of a wife and concubines? For the indebtedness of impoverished and needy relatives? Previously, when it was a case of life or death, one would not accept what was offered, but now when it is a matter of a beautiful estate one does. Previously, when it was a case of life or death, one would not accept what was offered, but now for the sake of the respect of a wife and concubines, one does. Previously, when it was a case of life or death, one would not accept what was offered, but now for the sake of the indebtedness of impoverished and needy relatives, one does. Is there no way of stopping this? This is called losing one's fundamental heart."

QU YUAN
(c. 340–278 B.C.)

Embracing Sand

Qu Yuan (Ch'ü Yüan, also known as Ch'ü P'ing), is traditionally recognized as the chief author of the poetry from the Chu Ci *anthology (*The Songs of the South*). This anthology is a collection of*

Chu poetry edited by Wang Yi, a librarian in service of the emperor Han Shundi in the 2nd century A.D. *Chu poetry is defined by certain characteristic elements of style and form that were originally used by poets of the Chu kingdom, a political power in what is now southern China that reached the height of its influence in the 4th century* B.C.

According to a biography by Sima Qian [q.v.] dating from early in the 1st century B.C., *Qu Yuan belonged to the royal house of Chu and was a foreign ambassador and valued servant to King Huai (ruled 328–299* B.C.*) during the Warring States period (variously dated 475 or 403 to 221* B.C.*), when expanding states were engaged in bloody mutual aggression as the old feudal system was giving way to political centralization. In Sima Qian's account, a high-ranking administrator of the court who was envious of Qu Yuan's favor with the king attempted to take credit for some of Qu Yuan's writings. When Qu Yuan refused to comply, the official made allegations to the king that Qu Yuan was boastful and proud, and Qu Yuan thus fell into disfavor with King Huai. The king's eldest son inherited the throne, but he, like his father, was also subject to the influence of deceitful advisors. Qu Yuan criticized the new king's poor judgment and was banished to a remote part of the kingdom. In protest, he drowned himself in the Miluo River.*

Qu Yuan's best known work is "Li sao" ("On Encountering Trouble"), a long poem in autobiographical form in which the poet describes himself as a nobleman descended from an ancient legendary ruler and depicts the growing disillusionment of an idealistic young man who has come to see that the world is filled with corrupt people and institutions. He plans to abandon the world and join the holy dead, symbolized by Peng Xian, who according to the original compiler of The Songs of the South, *Wang Yi, was an upright minister at the court of one of the Shang kings, who drowned himself when his good advice was not taken. Qu Yuan's poem "Li Sao" concludes with the following lines:*

Enough! There are no true men in the state: no one understands me.
Why should I cleave to the city of my birth?
Since none is worthy to work with in making good government,
I shall go and join Peng Xian in the place where he abides.

"Embracing Sand," presented here, is sometimes understood as an expansion of these final four lines of the earlier poem. "Embracing Sand" was Qu Yuan's suicide note: he is said to have written the poem and then clasped a large stone to his bosom to drown himself in the Miluo River. Thus the title "Embracing Sand" is presumed to refer to the practice of filling the bosom of one's robe with sand in order to drown oneself, much as Japanese suicides are said to have filled their sleeves with sand or gravel. Qu Yuan clearly represents his impending suicide as an example of resolve and personal restraint, as well as an escape from sorrow and grief, though a background of wounded dignity and angry pride is also evident, based in the disillusionment and isolation of an idealist much like that he had earlier expressed in "On Encountering Trouble."

Qu Yuan is still commemorated in China, as well as in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Malaysia, with dragon-boat races on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, the day he is believed to have drowned himself. A special variety of sticky-rice dumpling, wrapped in leaves and steamed, is thrown into the

river to feed, according to different accounts, Qu Yuan in his afterlife or as a distraction for the fish and dragons that would otherwise eat Qu Yuan's body.

Sources

Qu Yuan, quotation from "Li sao" ("On Encountering Trouble") and text from "Jiu zhang" ("Nine Pieces"), V, and "Huai sha" ("Embracing Sand") from *The Songs of the South. An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets*, tr. David Hawkes, London: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 78, 170–172; see also *Li Sao and Other Poems of Chu Yuan*, Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, trs., Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955, p. xi.

EMBRACING SAND

In the teeming late summer
When flowers and trees burgeon,
My heart with endless sorrow laden,
Forth I went to the southern land.

Eyes strain unseeing into the hazy gloom
Where a great quiet and stillness reign.
Disquieted and tormented,
I have met sorrow and long been afflicted.

I soothed my feelings, sought my purposes,
Bowed to my wrongs and still restrained myself.
Let others trim square to fit the round:
I shall not cast the true measure away.

To change his first intent and alter his course
Is a thing the noble man disdains.
I made my marking clear; I set my mind on the ink-line;
My former path I did not change.

Inwardly sound and of honest substance,
In this the great man excels so richly.
But when Chui the Cunning is not carving,
Who can tell how true a line he cuts?

When dark brocade is placed in the dark,
The dim-eyed will say that it has no pattern.
And when Li Lou peers to discern minutest things,
The purblind think that he must be sightless.

White is changed to black;
The high cast down and the low made high;
The phoenix languishes in a cage,
While hens and ducks can gambol free.

Jewels and stones are mixed together,
And in the same measure meted.
The courtier crowd are low and vulgar fellows;
They cannot understand the things I prize.

Great was the weight I carried, heavy the burdens I bore;
But I sank and stuck fast in the mire and could not get across.
A jewel I wore in my bosom, a gem I clasped in my hand;
But, helpless, I knew no way whereby I could make them seen.

The dogs of the village bark in chorus;
They bark when they do not comprehend.
Genius they condemn and talent they suspect—
Stupid and boorish that their manner is!

Art and nature perfected lay within me hidden;
But the crowd did not know of the rare gifts that were mine.
Unused materials I had in rich store;
Yet no one knew the things that I possessed.

I multiplied kindness, redoubled righteousness;
Care and probity I had in plenty.
But it was not my lot to meet such as Chong Hua;
So who could understand my behaviour?

It has always been so—this failure of happy meeting;
Though I do not know what can be the reason.
Tang and Yu lived a great while ago—
Too remote for me to long for!

I must curb my rebelling pride and check my anger,
Restrain my heart, and force myself to bow.
I have met sorrow, but still will be unswerving;
I wish my resolution to be an example.

Along my road I will go, and in the north halt my journey.
But the day is dusky and turns towards the evening.
I will unlock my sorrow and ease my grief,
And end it all in the Great End.

Luan

The mighty waters of the Yuan and Xiang with surging swell go rolling on their way;
The road is long, through places dark and drear, a way far and forlorn.
The nature I cherish in my bosom, the feelings I embrace, there are none to judge.
For when Bo Le is dead and gone, how can the wonder-horse go coursing?
The lives of all men on the earth have each their ordained lot.
Let my heart be calm and my mind at ease: why should I be afraid?
Yet still, in mounting sorrow and anguish, long I lament and sigh.
For the world is muddy-witted; none can know me; the heart of man cannot be told.
I know that death cannot be avoided, therefore I will not grudge its coming.
To noble men I here plainly declare that I will be numbered with such as you.

CHRYSIPPUS (c. 280–c. 206 B.C.)

The Stoics' Five Reasons for Suicide

Chrysippus, to whom von Armin attributes the fragment provided here (though it may be the work of one of his successors) was born at Soli in Cilicia. Chrysippus, a disciple of Cleanthes, became the third head of the Stoic school at Athens.

Founded by Zeno of Citium, Stoic philosophy had begun as a recognizable movement around 300 B.C.. Only fragments of the writings of the early Stoics remain, for the most part preserved by quotation in the works of later thinkers. Under the guidance of Chrysippus, Stoicism developed into a full philosophical discipline. Stoicism remained one of the most influential and fruitful philosophical movements in the Graeco-Roman world for more than 500 years.

Chrysippus was particularly known for his work in logic, especially in developing formal propositional logic, rather than for providing practical advice on how to live one's life, as were the efforts to varying extent of later Stoic thinkers like Epictetus [q.v.], Seneca [q.v.], and Marcus Aurelius. Nevertheless, in this fragment, Chrysippus encapsulates Stoic thinking on the matter of how to live—and end—one's life. The passage presented here gives the five reasons recognized by the Stoics as

adequate for suicide. A similar passage appears in Olympiodorus' later commentary on Plato's [q.v.] Phaedo.

Sources

Ioannes ab Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, Vol. 3, para. 768, Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1903, pp. 190–191, tr. Yukio Kachi. Some material in the introduction is from Nicholas White, tr. and ed., *Handbook of Epictetus* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1983), pp. 1–2.

THE STOICS' FIVE REASONS FOR SUICIDE

But the Stoic philosophers too understood philosophy to be the practice of death, and for this reason they wrote of five ways of reasonable departure from life. For . . . life is like a great party in which the soul seems to feast, and all the ways of reasonable departure from life correspond to the ways in which a party is broken up. Now, a party is broken up in five ways: 1) because a pressing matter suddenly turns up—for instance, a friend appears after a long absence, and you and the friend get up in delight to walk out and the party is broken up. Or 2), because revelers rush in, shouting obscenities; the party is likewise broken up. Or 3) because the meats served are spoiled, or 4) because the provisions have run out, or 5) because of drunken stupor, a party is broken up.

Reasonable departures from life take place in the same five ways: 1) because a pressing matter turns up, as in the case of someone commanded by the Pythia [the oracle of Apollo at Delphi] to slit his throat to save his own city, on the brink of destruction. Or 2) because tyrants rush in, forcing us to do shameful deeds or say forbidden things; or 3) because a serious illness prevents the soul from using the body as an instrument for a long time. For this reason Plato too does not approve of the dietetic part of medicine, because of its effect of moderating the disease and turning it into a chronic condition, but approves of the surgical and the pharmaceutical parts, to which Archigenes, the army doctor, resorted. So Sophocles too says:

> *It will not become a good doctor*
> *To chant incantations over a malady calling for the knife.*
>
> *(Ajax, 582)*

Or 4) because of poverty, as Theognis says well: ". . . Escaping from poverty, it is necessary to. . . ." Or 5) because of dementedness. For just as drunken stupor would break up a party there, so here too can one have oneself depart from life because of dementedness. For being demented is nothing but natural intoxication, and intoxication, nothing but self-induced dementia. The same consideration applies here.

SIMA QIAN
(c. 145/135–86 B.C.)

Records of the Grand Historian

The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu **(in Archive only)**

The Assassin and his Sister

Letter in Reply to Ren Shaoqing **(expanded in Archive)**

Sima Qian (Ssu-ma Ch'ien), whose father had been Grand Historian of China and who in 107 B.C. himself assumed that role, spent most of his life at the court of the Emperor Wu, the strong-willed emperor who brought the golden age of the Han dynasty to the peak of its power. Sima Qian's father, Sima Tan, in transforming the role of Grand Historian from duties largely involving astrology and divination to that of a true chronicler of the past, planned to write a work of history and had begun to collect material for it; it was in accord with his dying father's wish that Sima Qian assumed and expanded this task.

Sima Qian's writings, especially in their terseness and reliance upon dramatic episodes in which the historian makes his characters speak aloud, have remained the model for many of the major historical works in later ages in China, Korea, and Japan. His principal work, the Shi Ji, *or* Records of the Grand Historian, *in 130 chapters, is a collection of biographies that provides a history of the Chinese people and foreign peoples known to China from the earliest times to his own. It provides a comprehensive history of every society then known over a period of time reaching back over 2,000 years. Sima Qian was a meticulous researcher who traveled widely throughout China in search of historical information. He explains that his purpose is to "examine the deeds and events of the past and investigate the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay." Yet although Sima Qian chronicles the rise and fall of multitudinous societies in a pattern typically beginning with the virtuous, wise ruler of a new house to its ultimate decline with an evil or inept ruler, the one thing he sees as approaching permanence in the midst of change is the lasting power of goodness: as Burton Watson describes Sima Qian's view, "Evil destroys the doer, but good endures, through the sons of the father, the subjects of the ruler, the disciple of the teacher. It is the function of the historian to prolong the memory of goodness by preserving its record for all ages to see."*

The first selection presented here is a portion of the lengthy biography Sima Qian gives in the Records of the Grand Historian *of the great Xiang Yu (Hsiang Yü), the powerful military leader of Chu who, seeking to become emperor, fought the Han for control of various states of China in a struggle called the Chu-Han Contention (206–202 B.C.) following the collapse of the Qin (Ch'in) Dynasty. Huge—Xiang Yu was over six feet tall—cunning, and ruthless, he was famed for his bravery and capacity for treachery. His main rival was Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty as Emperor Gaozu. Although he had defeated Liu Bang and the Han armies in battle on many occasions, Xiang Yu made a series of unwise military decisions that finally resulted in Liu's troops surrounding him. The selection given here portrays Xiang Yu's military decline: it opens as Xiang Yu, surrounded, hears the singing of Chu songs and thus knows that most of his own people have deserted him. Sima Qian*

closes the account of Xiang Yu's suicide with his own commentary on both the greatness of Xiang Yu's triumphs and the character flaws that led to his downfall.

The second selection, an account given both in the Zhan Guo Ce (Strategies of the Warring States)*, a near-contemporary historical work of unknown authorship, and in the* Records of the Grand Historian*, contrasts two suicides: that of the assassin Nie Zheng (Nieh Cheng, c. 375 B.C.), employed as a dog butcher, who in his excessive concern for loyalty to his patron Yan Zhongzi (Yan Sui) mutilates himself in his act of suicide so that he cannot be recognized after killing Yan Zhongzi's enemy, the grand minister of Han, Xia Lei (Hsia Lei), so that through him his employer might not also be identified and the cycle of revenge might end. He is followed in death by his older sister Rong (Jung)—to whom Sima Qian gives a name even though she is a woman, because she, unlike her brother, chooses the right time to die: after she has revealed the identity of Nie Zheng's corpse and thus assured the preservation of his name. Her suicide is an act of self-sacrifice to grant fame to another. (In fact, Rong says that her brother mutilated himself to protect her—presumably from potential vengeful harm to her for what he did or the infamy of being the sister of an assassin—not a self-centered act at all.)*

The third selection provided here is Sima Qian's famous letter to Ren Shaoqing (Jen Shao-ch'ing), in which he tries to justify his own failure to commit suicide, even though the circumstances were such as to invite or even require it. Sima Qian had been condemned to imprisonment and castration by Emperor Wu for speaking out in defense of Li Ling, a general who had finally surrendered to the enemy when only a fraction of his army remained; the emperor had expected Li Ling to die with his men—as, indeed, such heroes as Xiang Yu had done. Sima Qian's letter, written after the punishment of castration had been imposed, gives his reasons for not killing himself, even though it was customary under such circumstances for men of honor to commit suicide and even though he sees himself as "a mutilated being who dwells in degradation" (the letter uses the word "shame" 19 times). Many of the heroes Sima Qian had described so vividly in his Records of the Grand Historian *had committed suicide in dramatic ways—not only Xiang Yu, but Li Guang and General Fan, who like Xiang Yu slit their own throats for reasons of honor and service to the state. But Sima Qian himself does not do so; he chooses instead to bear his disgrace in order to complete his manuscript and justify himself in the eyes of posterity.*

After the castration, and after Emperor Wu had realized his own role in Li Ling's defeat by failing to send him reinforcements, Sima Qian became Palace Secretary and enjoyed considerable honor and favor. Sima Qian's letter itself was preserved in The Book of Han*, a history written and compiled by Ban Biao, Ban Gu, and finally finished by Ban Zhao in 111 A.D.*

Sources

"The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu" in Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty I, Han Dynasty II*, trans. Burton Watson. Hong Kong and New York: Columbia University Press, rev. ed. 1993, Vol. 1, pp. 17–18, 43–48, quoted and paraphrased in biographical note from introductions to both volumes; story of the assassin and his sister from Szuma Chien, *Selections from Records of the Historian*, tr. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1979; "Ssu-ma Ch'ien's Letter in Reply to Jen Shao-ch'ing" in Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Grand Historian of China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, pp. 57–67. See also Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 9, 105–109.

from RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN

THE ASSASSIN AND HIS SISTER

Nie Zheng was a native of Shenjing Village in the district of Zhi. Having killed a man, he escaped with his mother and elder sister to Qi where he set up as a butcher. Later Yan Sui of Puyang, who owed allegiance to Marquis Ai of Hann, offended the chief minister Xia Lei and fled to escape punishment, searching everywhere for a man who would kill Xia Lei for him. When he reached Qi, he heard Nie Zheng was a brave man who was living as a butcher to avoid vengeance. Yan Sui called him several times, then he prepared a feast in honour of Nie Zheng's mother at which he presented her with a hundred pieces of gold. Amazed by such munificence, Nie Zheng declined the gift. When Yan Sui insisted he said, "I am blessed with an aged mother. Though I am but a poor stranger in these parts, I am able to supply her daily food and clothing by selling dog meat. Since I can provide for her, I dare not accept your gift."

Yan Sui sent the others away and told Nie Zheng, "I have an enemy. Reaching Qi after travelling through many states, I heard that you, Sir, were a man with a high sense of honour.

"So I am offering you a hundred gold pieces to supply food and clothing for your mother and to win your friendship. I want no other return."

Nie Zheng replied, "I have lowered my ambitions and humbled myself to sell meat in the market solely for my mother's sake. While she lives, I cannot promise my services to anyone." He could not be prevailed upon to accept, whereupon Yan Sui took a courteous leave of him.

In due time Nie Zheng's mother died. After she was buried and the mourning over Nie Zheng said, "I am a poor stall-keeper wielding a butcher's cleaver, while Yan Sui is a state minister; yet he came with a thousand *li* in his carriage to seek my friendship. I did very little for him, performed no great services to deserve his favour, yet he offered my mother a hundred pieces of gold; and though I did not accept, this shows how well he appreciated me. His longing for revenge made this worthy gentleman place his faith in one so humble and obscure. How, then, can I remain silent? Previously I ignored his overture for my mother's sake. Now that my mother has died of old age, I must serve this man who appreciates me."

So he went west to Puyang to see Yan Sui and told him, "I refused you before because my mother was still alive, but now she has died of old age. Who is the man on whom you want to take vengeance? I am at your service."

Then Yan Sui told him the whole story, saying, "My enemy is Xia Lei, chief minister of Hann and uncle of the marquis of Hann. He has many clansmen and his residence is closely guarded. All my attempts to assassinate him have failed. Since you are good enough to help me, I can supply you with chariots, cavalry and men."

"Hann is not far from Wei, and we are going to kill the chief minister who is also the ruler's uncle," said Nie Zheng. "In these circumstances, too many men would make for trouble and word might get out. Then the whole of Hann would become your enemy and that would be disastrous."

So refusing all assistance, he bid farewell and carrying his sword went alone to the capital of Hann. Xia Lei, seated in his office, was surrounded by a host of guards and armed attendants; but Nie Zheng, marching straight in and up the steps, stabbed the minister to death. The attendants, in utter confusion, were set upon with loud cries by Nie Zheng, till several dozen of them were laid low. Then he gashed his face, gouged out his eyes and stabbed himself so that his guts spilled out and he died.

Nie Zheng's corpse was exposed in the market-place in Hann and inquiries were made but no one knew who he was. A reward of thousand gold pieces was offered for identifying the assassin, but time passed without any news. Then Nie Zheng's sister Rong heard of Xia Lei's assassination and the large reward offered for the identification of his unknown assassin, whose corpse had been exposed. "Can this be my brother?" she sobbed. "Ah, how well Yan Sui understood him!"

She went to the market-place in Hann and found that it was indeed he. Falling on the corpse she wept bitterly and cried, "This is Nie Zheng from Shenjing Village in Zhi!"

The people in the market warned her, "This man savagely murdered our chief minister and the king—has offered a thousand gold pieces for his name. Did you not know this? Why do you come to identify him?"

"I knew this," she replied. "But he humbled himself to live as a tradesman in the market because our mother died and I had no husband. After our mother died and I was married, Yan Sui raised him from his squalor to be his friend. How else could he repay Yan Sui's great kindness? A man should die for a friend who knows his worth. Because I was still alive, he mutilated himself to hide his identity. But how can I, for fear of death, let my noble brother perish unknown?"

This greatly astounded the people in the market. Having called aloud on heaven three times, she wailed in anguish and died beside her brother.

Word of this reached Jin, Chu, Qi and Wei, and everyone commented, "Not only was Nie Zheng able, but his sister was a remarkable woman too." Nie Zheng might never have given his life for Yan Sui had he known that his sister, with her strong resolution, would not balk at his corpse exposed in the market-place and take the long difficult journey to make his name known and perish by his side. Yan Sui certainly was a good judge of character able to find loyal helpers!

LETTER IN REPLY TO REN SHAOQING

A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. Above all, a man must bring no shame to his forbears. Next he must not shame his person, nor be shameful in his countenance, nor in his words. Below such a one is he who suffers the shame of being bound, and next he who bears, and next he who bears the shame of marked clothing. Next is the man bound and fettered who knows the shame of rod and thorn, and the man who bears the shame of the shaved head and the binding manacle. Below again is the shame of mutilated flesh and severed limbs. Lowest of all is the extreme penalty, the "punishment of rottenness!"

The Commentary says: "Punishments shall not extend to the high officials." This means that a gentleman must be ever careful of proper conduct.

When the fierce tiger dwells in the deep hills, all the other beasts tremble with fear. But when he is in the trap or the cage, he wags his tail and begs for food, for he has been gradually overawed and broken. Therefore there are cases when, even though one were to draw a circle on the ground and call it a prison, a gentleman would not enter, or though one carved a wooden image and set it up as a judge, a gentleman would not contend with it, but would settle the affair for himself in accordance with what is right. But when a man has been bound hand and foot with stocks and ropes, has been stripped to the skin and flogged with rods, and plunged into the depths of encircling walls, at that time when he sees the judge he strikes his head upon the ground and when he looks at the jailers his heart gasps with fear. Why? Because he has been gradually overawed and broken by force. A man must be thick-skinned indeed if he come to this and yet say, "I am not ashamed!" What respect could people have for such a man?

Xi Bo was an earl, and yet he was imprisoned at Youli. Li Si was prime minister, yet he suffered all the five punishments. Han Xin was a king, but he was put into fetters at Chen. Peng Yue and Zhang Ao faced south and called themselves independent, but they were both dragged to prison and punished. The Marquis of Jiang overthrew and punished all the Lü family; his power exceeded that of the Five Protectors of old, yet he was imprisoned in the Inquiry Room. The Marquis of Weiqi was a great general, yet he wore the red clothing and was bound with three fetters. Ji Bu was a manacled slave for Zhu Jia, and Guan Fu suffered shame in the prison of Jushi. All these men achieved the positions of feudal lords, generals, or ministers, and their fame reached to neighboring lands. But when they were accused of crimes and sentence was passed upon them, there was not one who could settle the matter with his hands by committing suicide. In the dust and filth of bondage, it has ever been the same, past and present. How in such circumstances can a man avoid shame?

From this you can see that "bravery and cowardice are only a matter of circumstance; strength and weakness are only a matter of the conditions." This is certain. Is there any reason to wonder at it? Furthermore, if a man does not quickly make his decision to settle things for himself outside the law, but waits until he has sunk lower and lower, till he lies beneath the whip and lash, and then decides to save his honor by suicide, is it not too late? This is probably the reason why the ancients hesitated to administer punishments to officials.

It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives and look after his wife and children. Only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things which he must do. Now I have been most unfortunate, for I lost my parents very early. With no brothers or sisters or close relations, I have been left alone an orphan. And you yourself, Shaoqing, have seen me with my wife and child, and know how things are. Yet the brave man does not necessarily die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamelessly to prolong my life, yet I know full well the difference between what ought to be followed and what rejected. How could I bring myself to sink into the shame of ropes and bonds? If even the lowest slave and scullion maid can bear to commit suicide, why should not one like myself be able to do what has to be done? But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling in vileness and disgrace without taking my leave, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart which I have not

been able to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity. Too numerous to record are the men of ancient times who were rich and noble and whose names have yet vanished away. It is only those who were masterful and sure, the truly extraordinary men, who are still remembered. When the Earl of the West was imprisoned at Youli, he expanded the *Changes;* Confucius was in distress and he made the *Spring and Autumn*; Qu Yuan was banished and he composed his poem "Encountering Sorrow"; after Zuo Qiu lost his sight, he composed the *Narratives from the States*; when Sunzi had had his feet amputated, he set forth the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei was banished to Shu but his *Spring and Autumn of Mr. Lü* has been handed down through the ages; while Han Feizi was held prisoner in Qin, he wrote "The Difficulties of Disputation" and "The Sorrow of Standing Alone"; most of the three hundred poems of the *Book of Odes* were written when the sages poured forth their anger and dissatisfaction. All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote about past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations. Those like Zuo Qiu, who was blind, or Sunzi, who had no feet, could never hold office, so they retired to compose books in order to set forth their thoughts and indignation, handing down their theoretical writings in order to show to posterity who they were. I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings. I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world which were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscript, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in the Famous Mountain. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it, and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret should I have? Such matters as these may be discussed with a wise man, but it is difficult to explain them to ordinary people.

It is not easy to dwell in poverty and lowliness while base men multiply their slanderous counsels. I met this misfortune because of the words I spoke. I have brought upon myself the scorn and mockery even of my native village and I have soiled and shamed my father's name. With what face can I again ascend and stand before the grave mound of my father and mother? Though a hundred generations pass, my defilement will only become greater. This is the thought that wrenches my bowels nine times each day. Sitting at home, I am befuddled as though I had lost something. I go out, and then realize that I do not know where I am going. Each time I think of this shame, the sweat pours from my back and soaks my robe. I am now no more than a servant in the harem. How could I leave of my own accord and hide away in some mountain cave? Therefore I follow along with the vulgar, floating and sinking, bobbing up and down with the times, sharing their delusions and madness.

Now you, Shaoqing, have advised me to recommend worthy men and promote scholars. But would not such a course be at odds with my own intent? Now although I should try to add glory and fame to myself, or with fine words seek to excuse my error, it would have no effect upon the vulgar. I would not be believed, but would only take upon myself further shame. Only after the day of death shall right and wrong at last be determined.

I cannot convey in writing my full meaning, but I have ventured to set forth brief my unworthy opinion.

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO (106–43 B.C.)

from *Tusculan Disputations* (expanded in Archive)
from *On Ends* (in Archive only)
from *On Old Age*

Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman, was born in Arpinum, near Rome, into a prosperous equestrian family. Cicero began his career as a lawyer and served in the military before later deciding to train as an orator. From the beginning, he gained a reputation for his rhetorical skill, defending an alleged patricide in his first major case and accusing friends of the dictator Sulla of the murder. Presumably due to political threats, Cicero spent the year 78 B.C. abroad in Asia Minor, Athens, and Rhodes. In 75 B.C., he was made quaestor in Sicily. Cicero made a favorable impression on the Sicilians, who engaged him in the prosecution of their disreputable governor Verres, who had usurped much of the province's wealth. After the reading of Cicero's first oration, Verres voluntarily withdrew and went into exile. The publishing of the orations and subsequent political alliances led Cicero to a rapid series of promotions from aedile to praetor and finally to consul. Cicero's quick action in opposing his rival, L. Sergius Catilina, whose attempt at consulship had failed, and convincing the senate of the dangers of an uprising won Cicero popular acclaim, but he had also had the conspirators executed without a trial. The hasty executions were controversial and left a mark on his political reputation. He was banished, recalled, sent as governor to Cicilia in Asia Minor, and when he returned, he sided first with Pompey in the Civil War and then later with Caesar.

Cicero's writings include philosophical and political discourses, books of rhetoric, orations, poetry, and letters. He was particularly interested in how philosophical teachings might be applied to the actual situations of human life. Cicero often used dialogue as a vehicle for his philosophical discourse, drawing freely on his broad understanding of Hellenistic thought, including late Platonic and Academic, Aristotelian and Peripatetic, Stoic, and Epicurean sources.

When he was 62, Cicero's beloved daughter Tullia died in childbirth. Cicero then left politics, retiring to his Tusculan villa to devote himself to philosophical studies and writing. He is said to have made it his custom to invite his friends to the villa for philosophical conversations, and the Tusculan Disputations *(45 B.C.) are said to be the legacy of five days of discussion of questions concerning how to overcome the fear of death, how to endure pain, the immortality of the soul, suicide, the moderation of*

passion, virtue, and related matters. They are dialogues of unique form, found nowhere else in Cicero's writings; in them one speaker is dominant (though unnamed, it is clearly Cicero himself) and objections are minimized.

On Old Age *(44 B.C.), said to be one of Cicero's most loved and admired works, addresses when it is proper to leave life in one's later years;* On Ends, *in which the speaker is the Stoic Cato, addresses some apparent paradoxes concerning the question. In both the* Tusculan Disputations *and* On Old Age, *Cicero expresses equanimity concerning the prospect of death: one should not fear death, since either the soul will be extinguished at death or, as he says he believes, it will go to a place of eternal life, and hence one will either lack unhappiness or be positively happy. (He does not consider a third possibility, that of a painful afterlife, or hell.) Self-elected death may play a role, but need not do so: in this characteristically Stoic view, the wise man, like an actor, does not have to appear all the way through the play "until the curtain is rung down" or live a life extended into old age; what matters is how well life is lived, not how long. Cicero's view of old age is optimistic, yet he says, ". . . the old must not grasp greedily after those last few years of life, nor must they walk out on them without cause."*

Supporting Octavian after the assassination of Caesar in 44 B.C., he delivered a series of censorious orations (the "Philippics") against Antony, who was gathering support for Caesar's memory. However, when Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus (the Second Triumvirate) were reconciled, Cicero's name appeared on a list of citizens whose lives were pronounced forfeit to the state. He was murdered leaving his country estate at Formiae, and his head and hands were presented to Antony and nailed to the rostrum in the Forum. In all, he had lived through five revolutions.

Sources

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from TUSCULAN DISPUTATIONS

I see that you have lofty aims and that you wish to be a pilgrim heavenward. I hope that this will be our lot. But suppose, as these thinkers hold, that souls do not survive after death: I see that in the case we are deprived of the hope of a happier life. But what evil does such a view imply? For suppose that the soul perishes like the body: is there then any definite sense of pain or sensation at all in the body after death? There is no one who says so, though Epicurus accuses Democritus of this, but the followers of Democritus deny it. And so there is no sensation in the soul either, for the soul is nowhere. Where, then is the evil, since there is no third thing? Is it because the actual departure of soul from body does not take place without sense of pain? Though I should believe this to be so, how petty a matter it is! But I think it False, and the fact is that after the departure takes place without sensation, sometimes even with a feeling of pleasure; and the

whole thing is trivial, whatever the truth, for departure takes place in a moment of time. What does cause anguish, or rather torture, is the departure from all those things that are good in life. Take care it may not more truly be said, from all its evils! Why should I *now* bewail the life of Man? I could do so with truth and justice. But what need is there, when my object is to avoid the thought that we shall be wretched after death, of rendering life still more wretched by lamentation? We have done this in the book in which we did our utmost to console ourselves. Death then withdraws us from evil, not from good, if truth is our object. Indeed this thought is discussed by Hegesias the Cyrenaic with such wealth of illustration that the story goes that he was stopped from lecturing on the subject by King Ptolemy, because a number of his listeners afterwards committed suicide. There is an epigram of Callimachus' upon Cleombrotus of Ambracia who, he says, without having met with any misfortune, flung himself from the city wall into the sea after reading Plato's book. Now in the book of Hegesias whom I have mentioned, Apokerteron, there appears a man who was passing away from life by starvation and is called back by his friends, and in answer to their remonstrances, details the discomforts of human life. I could do the same, but I should not go so far as he does in thinking it no advantage at all for anyone to live. Other cases I wave aside: is it an advantage still to me? I have been robbed of the consolations of family life and the distinctions of a public career, and assuredly, if we had died before this happened, death would have snatched us from evil, not from good.

from ON OLD AGE

An actor, in order to find favor, does not have to take part all the way through a play; he need only prove himself in any act in which he may appear; similarly the wise and good man does not have to keep going until the curtain is rung down. A brief span of years is quite long enough for living a good and honorable life; and if that span should be prolonged, we must not weep and wail about it, any more than farmers weep and wail at the coming of summer and autumn, after sweet springtime has passed. Spring, you see, symbolizes youth, and, as it were, displays the fruits that are to come; the remaining ages have been set up for the reaping and garnering of the fruits.

Now there is no fixed point at which old age must end, and we may properly go on living as long we can maintain and carry out our obligations . . . and make light of death; the result is that old age may be even more spirited than youth, and braver, too. This is the meaning of Solon's reply to Pisistratus, who had asked him what gave him the courage to resist him so boldly; Solon, we are told, replied, "My years." But life comes to its best end when, with mind unimpaired and senses intact, nature herself breaks up the fabric to which she first gave form and order. Now in every case, things freshly put together are hard to pull apart; things that have gotten old come to pieces with ease.

It follows that the old must not grasp greedily after those last few years of life, nor must they walk out on them without cause. Pythagoras has said that we are not to leave our post and station in life except by order of our commanding officer, that is, of God. There is the epitaph of

Solon the Wise, too, in which he declares that his death must not pass unwept and unhonored by his friends. I suppose he wants them to show that they loved him; but I rather think that Ennius put it better:

"Let none shed tears to show respect for me
nor make a moaning at my obsequies."

He thought it improper to weep and wail over death, since death was our entry into eternal life.

As for the act of dying, we may have some sensation there, but it will be no more than momentary, especially for the old. After death there will be either a pleasant sensation, or no sensation at all. In any event, from our youngest years we must train ourselves to make light of death, since the man who does not so train himself can never have peace of mind. For die we must, and for all we know, on this very day. Every minute of every hour, death hangs over us; if we live in terror of it, how can we keep our sanity?

It seems unnecessary to discuss the matter at such great length, when I recall Lucius Brutus—how he died in the act of setting his country free, or the Two Decii, who spurred their horses on to a death they freely chose, or Marcus Atilius, who marched off to the torture-chamber to keep the promise he had made to an enemy, or the two Scipios, who tried with their own bodies to block the advance of the Carthaginians, or your grandfather Lucius Paulus, who died to atone for the foolhardiness of his colleague at the battle of Cannae, or Marcus Marcellus, whose death even that most bloodthirsty of enemies would not permit to pass unhonored by burial—when I think, too, of our legionaries who, as I wrote in my *Origins*, have marched on many occasions briskly and with heads held high, into positions from which they never expected to return. Here then is something that young men have made light of—and young men who were not just uneducated but downright illiterate: are old men who have had all the advantages of education to fear a thing like that?

From a more general point of view, it seems to me that once we have had our fill of all the things that have engaged our interest, we have had our fill of life itself. There are interests that are proper to childhood: does a full-grown man regret their loss? There are interests that belong to early manhood: when we reach full maturity—what is called "Middle age"—do we look back to them with longing? Middle age itself has its special concerns; even these have lost their attraction for the old. Finally, there are interests peculiar to old age; these fall away, too, just as did those of the earlier years. When this has happened, a sense of the fullness of life tells us that it is time to die.

It is for these reasons, Scipio—for it was this that you told me you and Laelius were forever admiring—that old age is easy for me to bear, and is not only not painful, but positively a joy. And if I am deluded in believing that the soul of man is immortal, then I am glad to be deluded, and I hope no one, as long as I live, will ever wrench this delusion from me. If on the other hand, as certain petty philosophers have held, I shall have no sensation when I am dead, then I need have no fear that deceased philosophers will make fun of this delusion of mine. And even if we are not destined to live forever, it is no more than right that when his time has come, a man should die. For nature has set a proper limit on living as on all other things. Yes, old age is, so to speak, the last scene in the play; when we find it beginning to be

tiresome we should beat a hasty retreat from it, especially when we feel as if we had seen all this before, entirely too many times.

THE QUESTIONS OF KING MILINDA (c. 100 B.C.)

On Suicide

The Milindapañha, *or* The Questions of King Milinda, *sometimes assigned to one of the "three baskets" of the Pali canon of early Buddhist texts by the Burmese edition, is usually understood as a paracanonical text of Theravada Buddhism, the earlier, more conservative of the two principal branches of Buddhism. Theravada, closer to the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 B.C.), emphasizes the ideal of the* arhat, *the enlightened individual in his progress towards nirvana. Mahayana in contrast stresses the ideal of the* boddhisattva, *dedicated to helping others achieve enlightenment.*

The Questions of King Milinda *consist of a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander I, who reigned about 155–130 B.C. and was one of the Bactrian kings to invade farthest into India, and the Buddhist monk Mahathera Nagasena, believed to have been a historical figure who was sent to the kingdoms of Bactria as a Buddhist missionary at the time of Menander's rule. Menander (known as Milinda in Buddhist traditions), who was arrogant and impatient because he could not find an intellect sufficiently keen to explain the teachings of Buddhism, found his match in Nagasena. The dating of the text is difficult, but it could not have originated earlier than the reign of Menander in the 2nd century B.C., and it is known that the book was translated into Chinese sometime between 317 and 420 A.D. Most scholars place the composition of the* Questions *around 100 B.C. or a century later, possibly as late as the end of the 2nd century A.D.. According to legend, the* Questions *were compiled by the same monk who speaks in the dialogue, Nagasena.*

The Questions of King Milinda *is a significant and valuable work for many reasons. It records one of the earliest meetings between Buddhist and Hellenistic cultures; it gives a historical view of the 2nd-century Bactrian milieu; and it provides a nearly comprehensive understanding of Theravada Buddhist thought. Some of the important topics raised in the dialogue are the nature of truth, the problem of evil, why philosophical inquiry is unavailing in these issues, and how the process of rebirth occurs. In one portion of the text, King Menander asks how the Buddha can teach the need to overcome "old age, disease, and death" while proscribing suicide as a means to avoid these evils; he points out an apparent contradiction in Buddhist teaching, since it both prohibits suicide but also encourages the putting of an end to life in its doctrine of escape from suffering and rebirth. Nagasena then explains why the Buddha forbade self-killing, citing the reason that a person who is truly good, who is "full of benefit to all beings" should not "be done away with." According to* The Questions *and to Buddhist legend,*

although not historically confirmed, Menander abdicated his throne as a result of his encounter with Nagasena and joined the Buddhist sangha.

Sources

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ON SUICIDE

'Venerable Nâgasena, it has been said by the Blessed One: "A brother is not, O Bhikkhus, to commit suicide. Whosoever does so shall be dealt with according to the law." And on the other hand you (members of the Order) say: "On whatsoever subject the Blessed One was addressing the disciples, he always, and with various similes, preached to them in order to bring about the destruction of birth, of old age, of disease, and of death. And whosoever overcame birth, old age, disease, and death, him did he honour with the highest praise." Now if the Blessed One forbade suicide that saying of yours must be wrong, but if not then the prohibition of suicide must be wrong. This too is a double-edged problem now put to you, and you have to solve it.'

'The regulation you quote, O king, was laid down by the Blessed One, and yet is our saying you refer to true. And there is a reason for this, a reason for which the Blessed One both prohibited (the destruction of life), and also (in another sense) instigated us to it.'

'What, Nâgasena, may that reason be?'

'The good man, O king, perfect in uprightness, is like a medicine to men in being an antidote to the poison of evil, he is like water to men in laying the dust and the impurities of evil dispositions, he is like a jewel treasure to men in bestowing upon them all attainments in righteousness, he is like a boat to men inasmuch as he conveys them to the further shore of the four flooded streams (of lust, individuality, delusion, and ignorance), he is like a caravan owner to men in that he brings them beyond the sandy desert of rebirths, he is like a mighty rain cloud to men in that he fills their hearts with satisfaction, he is like a teacher to men in that he trains them in all good, he is like a good guide to men in that he points out to them the path of peace. It was in order that so good a man as that, one whose good qualities are so many, so various, so immeasurable, in order that so great a treasure mine of good things, so full of benefit to all beings, might not be done away with, that the Blessed One, O king, out of his mercy towards all beings, laid down that injunction, when he said: "A brother is not, O Bhikkhus, to commit suicide. Whosoever does so shall be dealt with according to the law." This is the reason for which the Blessed One prohibited (self-slaughter). And it was said, O king, by the Elder Kumâra Kassapa, the eloquent, when he was describing to Pâyâsi the Râganya the other world: "So long as Samanas and Brahmans of uprightness of life, and beauty of character, continue to exist—however long that time may be—just so long do they conduct themselves to the advantage and happiness of the great masses of the people, to the good and the gain and the weal of gods and men!'"

'And what is the reason for which the Blessed One instigated us (to put an end to life)? Birth, O king, is full of pain, and so is old age, and disease, and death. Sorrow is painful, and so is lamentation, and pain, and grief, and despair. Association with the unpleasant is painful, and separation from the pleasant. The death of a mother is painful, or of a father, or a brother, or a sister, or a son, or a wife, or of any relative. Painful is the ruin of one's family, and the suffering of disease, and the loss of wealth, and decline in goodness, and the loss of insight. Painful is the fear produced by despots, or by robbers, or by enemies, or by famine, or by fire, or by flood, or by the tidal wave, or by earthquake, or by crocodiles or alligators. Painful is the fear of possible blame attaching to oneself, or to others, the fear of punishment, the fear of misfortune. Painful is the fear arising from shyness in the presence of assemblies of one's fellows, painful is anxiety as to one's means of livelihood, painful the foreboding of death. Painful are (the punishments inflicted on criminals), such as being flogged with whips, or with sticks, or with split rods, having one's hands cut off, or one's feet, or one's hands and feet, or one's ears, or one's nose, or one's ears and nose. Painful are (the tortures inflicted on traitors)—being subjected to the Gruel Pot (that is, having boiling gruel poured into one's head from the top of which the skull bone has been removed)—or to the Chank Crown (that is, having the scalp rubbed with gravel till it becomes smooth like a polished shell)—or to the Râhu's Mouth (that is, having one's mouth held open by iron pins, and oil put in it, and a wick lighted therein)—or to the Fire Garland or to the Hand Torch (that is, being made a living torch, the whole body, or the arms only, being wrapped up in oily cloths, and set on fire)—or to the Snake Strips (that is, being skinned in strips from the neck to the hips, so that the skin falls in strips round the legs) or to the Bark Dress (that is, being skinned alive from the neck downwards, and having each strip of skin as soon as removed tied to the hair, so that these strips form a veil around one)—or to the Spotted Antelope (that is, having one's knees and elbows tied together, and being made to squat on a plate of iron under which a fire is lit)—or to the Flesh-hooks (that is, being hung up on a row of iron hooks)—or to the Pennies (that is, having bits cut out of the flesh, all over the body, of the size of pennies)—or to the Brine Slits (that is, having cuts made all over one's body by means of knives or sharp points, and then having salt and caustic liquids poured over the wounds)—or to the Bar Turn (that is, being transfixed to the ground by a bar of iron passing through the root of the ear, and then being dragged round and round by the leg)—or to the Straw Seat (that is, being so beaten with clubs that the bones are broken, and the body becomes like a heap of straw)—or to be anointed with boiling oil, or to be eaten by dogs, or to be impaled alive, or to be beheaded. Such and such, O king, are the manifold and various pains which a being caught in the whirlpool of births and rebirths has to endure. Just, O king, as the water rained down upon the Himâlaya mountain flows, in its course along the Ganges, through and over rocks and pebbles and gravel, whirlpools and eddies and rapids, and the stumps and branches of trees which obstruct and oppose its passage,—just so has each being caught in the succession of births and rebirths to endure such and such manifold and various pains. Full of pain, then, is the continual succession of rebirths, a joy is it when that succession ends. And it was in pointing out the advantage of that end, the disaster involved in that succession, that the Blessed One, great king, instigated us to get beyond birth, and old age, and disease, and death by the realisation of the final end of that succession of rebirths. This is the sense, O king, which led the Blessed One to instigate us (to put an end to life).'

'Very good, Nâgasena! Well solved is the puzzle (I put), well set forth are the reasons (you alleged). That is so, and I accept it as you say.'

[Here ends the problem as to suicide.]

LIVY
(59 B.C.–17 A.D.)

from *The History of Rome: The Rape of Lucretia*
(expanded in Archive)

Livy, or Titus Livius, Roman historian, was born in 59 B.C., according to St. Jerome, and died in 17 A.D. in Patavium, now the north Italian city of Padua. Livy lived much of his life in Rome during the rule of Caesar Augustus. He received the education of one from a wealthy background in philosophy and probably rhetoric, except that his education did not culminate in the usual period of study in a Greek city and his Greek was faulty. He never saw military duty, nor took part in politics.

By 30 B.C., Livy had moved to Rome, where he came to know Augustus. About this time, Livy began his monumental Ab Urbe Condita *or* History of Rome from its Foundation, *usually called* The History of Rome. *It provides an account of Rome from its founding in 753 B.C. down to 9 B.C. Only 35 of the original 142 books (chapters) of* The History *survive in complete form, though summaries exist for all of the books save two. Livy's political purpose in writing this work was to depict Rome as destined to rise from modest beginnings to greatness, and as was the practice of historians of his time, he includes many reconstructed speeches of important figures as purportedly verbatim accounts. However, Livy apparently shared the popular view of the time that Rome had morally degenerated from its comparatively virtuous beginnings. Today* The History *is valued more for its style and dramatic technique than for its historical accuracy.*

In The History, *Livy narrates the rape of a Roman matron, Lucretia, the wife of Collatinus, by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud), the seventh and last king of Rome (reigned 534/535–509/510 B.C.). This notorious incident led to the downfall of the Tarquin royal family and the establishment of a new republic under Lucius Brutus. Lucretia's suicide, one of the most famous incidents of early Roman history and understood as representing a Stoic ideal and a model of womanly virtue, has been widely portrayed in art and literature in subsequent centuries. Lucretia's suicide has also provoked subsequent commentary by many authors in various traditions on the question of whether self-killing can be an appropriate response following, or to prevent, sexual violation.*

Sources

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THE HISTORY OF ROME: THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA

The two Tarquins conceived the desire to ask which of them would succeed their father as king of Rome. From the inmost recess of the sanctuary this response is said to have issued: 'Whoever of you, my lads, first brings a kiss to his mother shall hold supreme power at Rome.' The Tarquins gave orders that no one say anything about this: they intended to keep their brother Sextus back in Rome in the dark and eliminate him as a possible successor. Between them they agree to draw lots to determine which, on reaching Rome, would be the first to kiss his mother. But Brutus thought the pythia's words meant something quite different. Pretending to slip, he fell to the ground and pressed his lips to the earth, the mother of us all.

Upon returning to Rome they found that preparations for war against the Rutuli were in full swing. These people inhabited the city of Ardea and were very wealthy for that time and place. Their wealth was the cause of the war: Tarquin wanted to enrich himself, now that his resources were exhausted from his many pubic works, and to mollify the plebeians with Ardea's plunder, for they disliked his rule both because of his general arrogance and because of their resentment at having been kept at work fit for ordinary workmen and slaves. Tarquin tried to take Ardea in an initial assault, but when this did not succeed, he fell back on blockading the city from behind siegeworks.

A permanent camp grew up and, as happens in a war that is long but not hard-fought, furloughs were freely granted, but more for the officers than the rank and file. Now the young princes of the royal house were in the habit of spending their free time feasting and carousing among themselves. It so happened that when they were drinking in the quarters of Sextus Tarquinius, where Tarquinius Collatinus, the son of Egerius, was one of the guests, they fell to discussing their wives. Each man praised his own extravagantly. When the dispute heated up, Collatinus said there was no need of talk. Why, in a few hours they could see for themselves that his Lucretia was the best of the lot. 'We're young and red-blooded. Why don't we ride off and see with our own eyes just what sort of wives we've got? The surest proof will be what each man finds when he shows up unexpectedly.' By this time they were quite drunk. 'Well then, let's go!' Spurring their horses they flew off to Rome.

The evening shadows were lengthening when they came upon the royal princesses feasting and frolicking with their friends. Then they sped off to Collatia: though the evening was late, they found Lucretia still in the main hall of her home, bent over her spinning and surrounded by her maids as they worked by lamplight. Lucretia was the clear winner of the contest. She graciously welcomed her husband and the Tarquins as they approached; Collatinus, happy in his victory, issued a comradely invitation for the royal young men to come in. When Sexton Tarquin set eyes upon her he was sized by the evil desire to debauch her, spurred on as he was by her beauty and redoubtable chastity. In the meantime, with the youthful lark now at an end, they returned to camp.

After a few days Sexton Tarquin, without Collatinus' knowledge, came to Collatia with a single companion. He was graciously welcomed, for no one suspected what he was up to, and after dinner was shown to a guest room. When the household was safely asleep, in the heat of passion he came to the sleeping Lucretia sword in hand and, pressing his hand on her breast, whispered, 'Say no word, Lucretia. I am Sexton Tarquin. There is a sword in my hand. You die if you make a sound.' She awoke in fright, and when she realized she could not call for help with the

threat of death hanging over her, Tarquin confessed his passion, pleaded with her, intermingling threats with entreaties and working in every way upon her feeling as a woman. When he saw she was resolute and would not yield even out of fear for her life, he threatened to disgrace her even in death by placing the naked body of a murdered slave next to her corpse, evidence that she had been killed in the act of committing adultery of the basest sort. When by this threat his lust vanquished her resolute chastity, he left the house exulting in his seeming conquest of the woman's honour.

Lucretia, stricken to the heart at the disgrace, sent the same messenger to her father in Rome and husband in Ardea: each was to come with one trustworthy friend; it must be done this way and done quickly: a terrible thing had happened. Spurius Lucretius arrived with Publius Valerius son of Volesus, Collatinus with Lucius Iunius Brutus, in whose company he was traveling *en route* to Rome when his wife's messenger chanced to meet him. They found Lucretia seated downcast in her bedchamber. At the arrival of her father and husband tears welled up, and when her husband asked, 'Are you all right?' she replied 'indeed, no. What can be right when a woman's virtue has been taken from her? The impress of another man is in your bed, Collatinus; yet only my body was defiled; my soul was not guilty. Death will be my witness to this. But pledge with your right hands and swear that the adulterer will not go unpunished. Sexton Tarquin did this, a guest who betrayed his host, an enemy in arms last night took his pleasure, fatal, alas, to me—and, if you act as you should, to him.' Each pledged his word in turn and tried to comfort the heartsick woman by fixing the guilt not upon the victim but the transgressor: the mind sins, they said, not the body, and there is not guilt when intent is absent. 'It is up to you,' she said, 'to punish the man as he deserves. As for me, I absolve myself of wrong, but not from punishment. Let no unchaste woman hereafter continue to live because of the precedent of Lucretia.' She took a knife she was hiding in her garments and drove it into her breast. Doubling over, she collapsed in death.

Husband and father raised a ritual cry of mourning for the dead. . . .

SENECA
(4 B.C.–65 A.D.)

from *Moral Letters to Lucilius*

Letter 70: On the Proper Time to Slip the Cable (expanded in Archive)
Letter 77: On Taking One's Own Life (expanded in Archive)
Letter 78: On the Healing Power of the Mind (in Archive only)

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, born in Cordoba, Spain, was the son of the prominent rhetorician and writer known as Seneca Rhetor, or Seneca the Elder; and Helvia, a cultured woman of deep philosophical interests. As a young boy, Seneca the Younger was sent to Rome to study rhetoric and classical philosophy. He showed promise in law and politics, but was hampered by poor health and the uncertain political climate in Rome.

After a recuperative period in Egypt, Seneca returned to Rome and re-entered public life, rapidly gaining fame as an orator. This brought him into disfavor with the emperor Caligula, who wanted no rivals, and Seneca would probably have been murdered if Caligula had not been told that Seneca's poor health would be the death of him before long. Seneca had been a member of the court of the emperor Claudius before he was accused by the empress Messalina of being the lover of Claudius's niece; Seneca was condemned to death, but the sentence was changed to banishment to Corsica. Seneca spent eight years in exile on Corsica, where he wrote the Consolations; *he was recalled by Agrippina, now married to her uncle Claudius, to become tutor to her son Nero. After Agrippina murdered Claudius and Nero acceded to the throne, Seneca together with the praetorian prefect Burrus exercised considerable political influence. There was a brief period of good government, encouraging fiscal and judicial reforms and a more humane attitude toward slaves. However, in 59, Agrippina was murdered by Nero, with the complicity of Seneca, and other conspiracies were unleashed. Nero began to turn against Seneca; he permitted Seneca to retire from politics in 62, but three years later, accused him of being involved in the Pisonian conspiracy and had him sentenced to death. Seneca committed suicide by exsanguination, opening his veins. According to Tacitus [q.v.], Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide; other historians maintain, however, that Seneca chose to commit suicide rather than be executed for his alleged part in the conspiracy.*

Seneca's writings include the Moral Essays, *the* Moral Letters to Lucilius *(a collection of 124 essays on a wide range of topics, including suicide), several tragedies based on classical Greek drama, dialogues, and seven books of philosophical essays called* Natural Questions. *He was not so much an original philosopher as a moral teacher and proponent of Stoic thought; his originality rests mainly in the artistic and compelling way he presented his ideas. He urged people to be indifferent to the fleeting things of the world, emphasizing composure, wisdom, goodness, and control of the emotions over false valuations of material goods and external praise, and he viewed the achievement of virtue as the true end of philosophy. Seneca's influence has been felt in both philosophy and drama, especially in medieval and Renaissance literature.*

In these selections from the Moral Letters, *Seneca argues that it is the quality of life, not the quantity, that is important. He argues against thinking of suicide as an act that inappropriately cuts a life short. Unlike a journey cut short, which is incomplete, life cut short can still be complete if it has been lived well. Freedom and self-determination are of primary importance; suicide is the way for one to retain control and freedom over one's life, and, in accordance with Stoic thinking, it is the act par excellence of the wise man. While history gives examples of noble figures who have killed themselves, such as Cato, Seneca also gives examples of ordinary people who have done so as well, arguing that only will and courage are needed to end one's life, not even a divine call. "The wise man will live as long as he ought," Seneca famously says in Letter 70, "not as long as he can." Among the Stoics, Seneca's celebration of voluntary death is most pronounced and most central to his thought.*

Source

Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Letters 70, 77, 78, tr. Richard M. Gummere, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920, Vol. 2, pp. 57–73, 169–199.

from MORAL LETTERS TO LUCILIUS

Letter 70: On the Proper Time to Slip the Cable

After a long space of time I have seen your beloved Pompeii. I was thus brought again face to face with the days of my youth. And it seemed to me that I could still do, nay, had only done a short time ago, all the things which I did there when a young man. We have sailed past life, Lucilius, as if we were on a voyage, and just as when at sea, to quote from our poet Virgil,

Lands and towns are left astern,

> *even so, on this journey where time flies with the greatest speed, we put below the horizon first our boyhood and then our youth, and then the space which lies between young manhood and middle age and borders on both, and next, the best years of old age itself. Last of all, we begin to sight the general bourne of the race of man. Fools that we are, we believe this bourne to be a dangerous reef; but it is the harbour, where we must some day put in, which we may never refuse to enter; and if a man has reached this harbour in his early years, he has no more right to complain than a sailor who has made a quick voyage. For some sailors, as you know, are tricked and held back by sluggish winds, and grow weary and sick of the slow-moving calm; while others are carried quickly home by steady gales.*

You may consider that the same thing happens to us; life has carried some men with the greatest rapidity to the harbour, the harbour they were bound to reach even if they tarried on the way, while others it has fretted and harassed. To such a life, as you are aware, one should not always cling. For mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can. He will mark in what place, with whom, and how he is to conduct his existence, and what he is about to do. He always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life. As soon as there are many events in his life that give him trouble and disturb his peace of mind, he sets himself free. And this privilege is his, not only when the crisis is upon him, but as soon as Fortune seems to be playing him false; then he looks about carefully and sees whether he ought, or ought not, to end his life on that account, he holds that it makes no difference to him whether his taking-off be natural or self-inflicted, whether it comes later or earlier. He does not regard it with fear, as if it were a great loss; for no man can lose very much when but a driblet remains. It is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill.

That is why I regard the words of the well-known Rhodian as most unmanly. This person was thrown into a cage by his tyrant, and fed there like some wild animal. And when a certain man advised him to end his life by fasting, he replied: "A man may hope for anything while he has life." This may be true; but life is not to be purchased at any price. No matter how great or how well-assured certain rewards may be, I shall not strive to attain them at the price of a shameful confession of weakness. Shall I reflect that Fortune has all power over one who lives, rather than reflect that she has no power over one who knows how to die? There are times, nevertheless, when a man, even though certain death impends and he knows that torture is in store for him, will refrain from lending a hand to his own punishment; to himself, however, he would lend a hand. It is folly to die through fear of dying. The executioner is upon you; wait for him. Why

anticipate him? Why assume the management of a cruel task that belongs to another? Do you grudge your executioner his privilege, or do you merely relieve him of his task? Socrates might have ended his life by fasting; he might have died by starvation rather than by poison. But instead of this he spent thirty days in prison awaiting death, not with the idea "everything may happen," or "so long an interval has room for many a hope" but in order that he might show himself submissive to the laws and make the last moments of Socrates an edification to his friends. What would have been more foolish than, scorning death, at the same time to be afraid of poison?

Scribonia, a woman of the stern old type, was an aunt of Drusus Libo. This young man was as stupid as he was well born, with higher ambitions than anyone could have been expected to entertain in that epoch, or a man like himself in any epoch at all. When Libo had been carried away ill from the senate-house in his litter, though certainly with a very scanty train of followers,—for all his kinsfolk undutifully deserted him, when he was no longer a criminal but a corpse,—he began to consider whether he should commit suicide, or await death. Scribonia said to him: "What pleasure do you find in doing another man's work?" But he did not follow her advice; he laid violent hands upon himself. And he was right, after all; for when a man is doomed to die in two or three days at his enemy's pleasure, he is really "doing another man's work" if he continues to live.

No general statement can be made, therefore, with regard to the question whether, when a power beyond our control threatens us with death, we should anticipate death, or await it. For there are many arguments to pull us in either direction. If one death is accompanied by torture, and the other is simple and easy, why not snatch the latter? Just as I shall select my ship when I am about to go on a voyage, or my house when I propose to take a residence, so I shall choose my death when I am about to depart from life. Moreover, just as a long-drawn-out life does not necessarily mean a better one, so a long-drawn-out death necessarily means a worse one. There is no occasion when the soul should be humoured more than at the moment of death. Let the soul depart as it feels itself impelled to go; whether it seeks the sword, or the halter, or some draught that attacks the veins, let it proceed and burst the bonds of its slavery. Every man ought to make his life acceptable to others besides himself, but his death to himself alone. The best form of death is the one we like. Men are foolish who reflect thus: "One person will say that my conduct was not brave enough; another, that I was too headstrong; a third, that a particular kind of death would have betokened more spirit." What you should really reflect is: "I have under consideration a purpose with which the talk of men has no concern!" Your sole aim should be to escape from Fortune as speedily as possible; otherwise, there will be no lack of persons who will think ill of what you have done.

You can find men who have gone so far as to profess wisdom and yet maintain that one should not offer violence to one's own life, and hold it accursed for a man to be the means of his own destruction; we should wait, say they, for the end decreed by nature. But one who says this does not see that he is shutting off the path to freedom. The best thing which eternal law ever ordained was that it allowed to us one entrance into life, but many exits. Must I await the cruelty either of disease or of man, when I can depart through the midst of torture, and shake off my troubles? This is the one reason why we cannot complain of life: it keeps no one against his will. Humanity is well situated, because no man is unhappy except by his own fault. Live, if you so desire; if not, you may return to the place whence you came. You have had veins cut for the purpose of reducing your weight. If you would pierce your heart, a gaping wound is not necessary; a lancet will open the way to that great freedom, and tranquility can be purchased at the cost of a pin-prick. . . .

. . . You need not think that none but great men have had the strength to burst the bonds of human servitude; you need not believe that this cannot be done except by a Cato,—Cato, who with his hand dragged forth the spirit which he had not succeeded in freeing by the sword. Nay, men of the meanest lot in life have by a mighty impulse escaped to safety, and when they were not allowed to die at their own convenience, or to suit themselves in their choice of the instruments of death, they have snatched up whatever was lying ready to hand, and by sheer strength have turned objects which were by nature harmless into weapons of their own. For example, there was lately in a training-school for wild-beast gladiators a German, who was making ready for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself,—the only thing which he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked the breath from his body. That was truly to insult death! Yes, indeed; it was not a very elegant or becoming way to die; but what is more foolish than to be over-nice about dying? What a brave fellow! He surely deserved to be allowed to choose his fate! How bravely he would have wielded a sword! With what courage he would have hurled himself into the depths of the sea, or down a precipice! Cut off from resources on every hand, he yet found a way to furnish himself with death, and with a weapon for death. Hence you can understand that nothing but the will need postpone death. Let each man judge the deed of this most zealous fellow as he likes, provided we agree on this point,—that the foulest death is preferable to the cleanest slavery. . . .

. . . When a man desires to burst forth and take his departure, nothing stands in his way. It is an open space in which Nature guards us. When our plight is such as to permit it, we may look about us for an easy exit. If you have many opportunities ready to hand, by means of which you may liberate yourself, you may make a selection and think over the best way of gaining freedom; but if a chance is hard to find, instead of the best snatch the next best, even though it be something unheard of, something new. If you do not lack the courage, you will not lack the cleverness, to die. See how even the lowest of slave, when suffering goads him on, is aroused and discovers a way to deceive even the most watchful guards! He is truly great who not only has given himself the order to die, but has also found the means. . . .

What, then? If such a spirit is possessed by abandoned and dangerous men, shall it not be possessed also by those who have trained themselves to meet such contingencies by long meditation, and by reason, the mistress of all things? It is reason which teaches us that fate has various ways of approach, but the same end, and that it makes no difference at what point the inevitable event begins. Reason, too, advises us to die, if we may, according to our taste; if this cannot be, she advises us to die according to our ability, and to seize upon whatever means shall offer itself for doing violence to ourselves. It is criminal to "live by robbery"; but, on the other hand, it is most noble to "die by robbery." Farewell.

Letter 77: On Taking One's Own Life

Suddenly there came into our view to-day the "Alexandrian" ships,—I mean those which are usually sent ahead to announce the coming of the fleet; they are called "mail-boats.". . . While everybody was bustling about and hurrying to the water-front, I felt great pleasure in my laziness, because, although I was soon to receive letters from my friends, I was in no hurry to know how my affairs were progressing abroad, or what news the letters were bringing; for

some time now I have had no losses, nor gains either. Even if I were not an old man, I could not have helped feeling pleasure at this; but as it is, my pleasure was far greater. For, however small my possessions might be, I should still have left over more traveling-money than journey to travel, especially since this journey upon which we have set out is one which need not be followed to the end. An expedition will be incomplete if one stops half-way, or anywhere on this side of one's destination; but life is not incomplete if it is honourable. At whatever point you leave off living, provided you leave off nobly, your life is a whole. Often, however, one must leave off bravely, and our reasons therefore need not be momentous; for neither are the reasons momentous which hold us here.

Tullius Marcellinus, a man whom you knew very well, who in youth was a quiet soul and became old prematurely, fell ill of a disease which was by no means hopeless; but it was protracted and troublesome, and it demanded much attention; hence he began to think about dying. He called many of his friends together. Each one of them gave Marcellinus advice,—the timid friend urging him to do what he had made up his mind to do; the flattering and wheedling friend giving counsel which he supposed would be more pleasing to Marcellinus when he came to think the matter over; but our Stoic friend, a rare man, and, to praise him in language which he deserves, a man of courage and vigour, admonished him best of all, as it seems to me. For he began as follows: "Do not torment yourself, my dear Marcellinus, as if the question which you are weighing were a matter of importance. It is not an important matter to live; all your slaves live, and so do all animals; but it is important to die honourably, sensibly, bravely. Reflect how long you have been doing the same thing: food, sleep, lust,— this is one's daily round. The desire to die may be felt, not only by the sensible man of the brave or unhappy man, but even by the man who is merely surfeited."

Marcellinus did not need someone to urge him, but rather someone to help him; his slaves refused to do his bidding. The Stoic therefore removed their fears, showing them that there was no risk involved for the household except when it was uncertain whether the master's death was self-sought or not; besides, it was as bad a practice to prevent one's master from killing himself as it was to kill him. Then he suggested to Marcellinus himself that it would be a kindly act to distribute gifts to those who had attended him throughout his whole life, when that life was finished, just as, when a banquet is finished, the remaining portion is divided among the attendants who stand about the table. Marcellinus was of a compliant and generous disposition, even when it was a question of his own property; so he distributed little sums among his sorrowing slaves, and comforted them besides. No need had he of sword or of bloodshed; for three days he fasted and had a tent put up in his very bedroom. Then a tub was brought in; he lay in it for a long time, and, as the hot water was continually poured over him, he gradually passed away, not without a feeling of pleasure, as he himself remarked,—such a feeling as a slow dissolution is wont to give. Those of us who have ever fainted know from experience what this feeling is.

This little anecdote into which I have digressed will not be displeasing to you. For you will see that your friend departed neither with difficulty nor with suffering. Though he committed suicide, yet he withdrew most gently, gliding out of life. The anecdote may also be of some use; for often a crisis demands just such examples. There are times when we ought to die and are unwilling; sometimes we die and are unwilling. No one is so ignorant as not to know that we must some time die; nevertheless, when one draws near death, one turns to flight, trembles, and laments. Would you not think him an utter fool who wept because he was not alive a thousand years ago? And is he not just as much of a fool who weeps because he will not be alive a thousand years from now? It is all the same; you will not be, and you were not. Neither of these periods of

time belongs to you. You have been cast upon this point of time; if you would make it longer, how much longer shall you make it? Why weep? Why pray? You are taking pains to no purpose. . . .

. . . You think, I suppose, that it is now in order for me to cite some examples of great men. No, I shall cite rather the case of a boy. The story of the Spartan lad has been preserved: taken captive while still a stripling, he kept crying in his Doric dialect, "I will not be a slave!" and he made good his word; for the very first time he was ordered to perform a menial and degrading service,— and the command was to fetch a chamber pot,—he dashed out his brains against the wall. So near at hand is freedom, and is anyone still a slave? Would you not rather have your own son die thus than reach old age by weakly yielding? Why therefore are you distressed, when even a boy can die so bravely? Suppose that you refuse to follow him; you will be led. Take into your own control that which is now under the control of another. Will you not borrow that boy's courage, and say: "I am no slave!"? Unhappy fellow, you are a slave to men, you are a slave to your business, you are a slave to life. For life, if courage to die be lacking, is slavery.

Have you anything worth waiting for? Your very pleasures, which cause you to tarry and hold you back, have already been exhausted by you. . . . You are afraid of death; but how can you scorn it in the midst of a mushroom supper? You wish to live; well, do you know how to live? You are afraid to die. But come now: is this life of yours anything but death? Gaius Caesar was passing along the Via Latina, when a man stepped out from the ranks of the prisoners, his grey beard hanging down even to his breast, and begged to be put to death. "What!" said Caesar, "are you alive now?" That is the answer which should be given to men to whom death would come as a relief. "You are afraid to die; what! are you alive now?" "But," says one, "I wish to live, for I am engaged in many honourable pursuits. I am loth to leave life's duties, which I am fulfilling with loyalty and zeal." Surely you are aware that dying is also one of life's duties? You are deserting no duty; for there is no definite number established which you are bound to complete. There is no life that is not short. Compared with the world of nature, even Nestor's life was a short one, or Sattia's, the woman who bade carve on her tombstone that she had lived ninety and nine years. Some persons, you see, boast of their long lives; but who could have endured the old lady if she had had the luck to complete her hundredth year? It is with life as it is with a play,—it matters not how long the action is spun out, but how good the acting is. It makes no difference at what point you stop. Stop whenever you choose; only see to it that the closing period is well turned. Farewell.

VALERIUS MAXIMUS (fl. c. 14–c. 37)

from *Memorable Doings and Sayings* (expanded in Archive)

Born to a poor and undistinguished family, the facts of Valerius Maximus's life remain largely unknown. Attached to the retinue of Sextus Pompeius (consul and later proconsul of Asia during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius and part of a literary circle to which Ovid belonged), Valerius accompanied Sextus to the East in the mid 20's. Valerius compiled a collection of historical anecdotes,

Memorable Doings and Sayings, *taken largely from Greek and other Latin writers, apparently to be used for teaching students of rhetoric the art of using historical references to embellish speeches. His sources include Cicero [q. v.] and Livy [q. v.]. These anecdotes, grouped in nine books under virtues and vices, described both Roman and foreign practices.*

The brief account of end-of-life customs Valerius ascribes to the Massilians (inhabitants of what is now Marseilles, France) involves a practice in which people having rational reasons for ending their lives could apply to the Senate for permission to do so, and with it, have access to the state-maintained supply of the poison hemlock. What is notable about Valerius's account is his report that two sorts of reasons were recognized as compelling: if one faced severe suffering or other hardship, or if one's life were going really well and one did not choose to face a later decline. While Valerius is not recognized as a reliable historian and his writings contain many inconsistencies, errors, and contradictions, his work is the only authority for accounts of the Massilians. Similarly, Valerius's relating of the voluntary death of a woman on the isle of Ceos, an Aegean island Valerius had apparently visited en route to the East with Sextus Pompeius (the customs of Ceos were later the focus of an essay by Montaigne [q.v.]), is also compelling: in her 90s, still in good health and of high rank and good fortune, she nevertheless seeks permission to end her life while still, so to speak, ahead of the game.

Source

Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, Book II, 6, ed. and tr. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge and London: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2000, alternate English, pp. 167–177. Footnotes deleted. Quotation in introduction from p. 4.

from MEMORABLE DOINGS AND SAYINGS

The same community [the Massilians] is a most strict guardian of morals, not allowing mimes access to the stage, as their themes for the most part involve the enactment of illicit intercourse, lest the habit of watching such things take licence to imitate them. It closes its gates to all who by some pretense of religion seek sustenance for sloth, holding that false and fraudulent superstition should be ousted.

Also, from the foundation of the city there is a sword therein to kill the guilty. It is eroded by rust and scarcely adequate to its function, but a sign that even in the smallest details the monuments of ancient custom are to be preserved. Also two coffins lie before their gates. In one the bodies of freemen, in the other of slaves are carried in a cart to the place of burial without wailing or breast-beating. Mourning ends on the day of the funeral with a domestic sacrifice and a banquet for relatives and friends. For what is the use of indulging human grief or arousing odium against divine power because it did not choose to share its immortality with us?

A poison compounded of hemlock is under public guard in that community, which is given to one who has shown reasons to the Six Hundred, as their senate is called, why death is desirable for him. The enquiry is conducted with firmness tempered by benevolence, not suffering the subject to leave life rashly but providing swift means of death to one who rationally desires a way out. Thus

persons encountering an excess of bad fortune or good (for either might afford reason for ending life, the one lest it continue, the other lest it fail) find a finish to it in an approved departure.

I believe this usage of the Massilians did not originate in Gaul but was borrowed from Greece because I saw it also observed in the island of Cea when I entered the town of Iulis on my way to Asia with Sex. Pompeius. For it so happened on that occasion that a lady of the highest rank there but in extreme old age, after explaining to her fellow citizens why she ought to depart from life, determined to put an end to herself by poison and set much store on having her death gain celebrity by the presence of Pompeius. Nor could that gentleman reject her plea, excellently endowed as he was with the virtue of good nature as with all other noble qualities. So he visited her and in fluent speech, which flowed from his lips as from some copious fountain of eloquence, tried at length but in vain to turn her back from her design. Finally he let her carry out her intention. Having passed her ninetieth year in the soundest health of mind and body, she lay on her bed, which was spread, as far as might be perceived, more elegantly than every day, and resting on her elbow she spoke: "Sex. Pompeius, may the gods whom I am leaving rather than those to whom I am going repay you because you have not disdained to urge me to live nor yet to be witness of my death. As for me, I have always seen Fortune's smiling face. Rather than be forced through greed of living to see her frown, I am exchanging what remains of my breath for a happy end, leaving two daughters and a flock of seven grandchildren to survive me." Then, having urged her family to live in harmony, she distributed her estate among them, and having consigned her own observance and the domestic rites to her elder daughter, she took the cup in which the poison had been mixed in a firm grasp. After pouring libations to Mercury and invoking his divine power, that he conduct her on a calm journey to the happier part of the underworld, she eagerly drained the fatal potion. She indicated in words the parts of her body which numbness seized one by one, and when she told us that it was about to reach her vitals and heart, she summoned her daughters' hands to the last office, to close her eyes. As for us Romans, she dismissed us, stunned by so extraordinary a spectacle but bathed in tears.

PLINY THE ELDER (23–79)

from *Natural History*:

Of God
The Nature of the Earth
What Diseases are Attended with the Greatest Pain

Gaius Plinius Secundus, known as Pliny the Elder to differentiate him from his nephew Pliny the Younger (62–113) [q.v.], was born in Como, Italy, and moved to Rome in his youth. He served as a military commander in Germany and was Procurator in Hispania Tarraconensis, but largely avoided politics. A scholar of considerable note, he wrote numerous works in a variety of fields, including

rhetoric, history, biology, natural science, and military science. Only the Natural History *remains extant. The 37 books of this work form an encyclopedia of human biology and natural science, including extensive accounts of herbal medicines.*

In the year 79, Vesuvius erupted. Pliny, who was at the time commander of the fleet at Misenum on the Bay of Naples, was eager to observe the volcano at close range and attempt a rescue of people in the towns beneath the volcano; he died of exposure to poison gas while trying to do so, having collapsed and been left by his companions.

The first portion of this text presents Pliny's well-known remark that some things are not possible for God, not even suicide, "the supreme boon that [God] has bestowed on man among all the penalties of life. . . ." This remark is often quoted out of context, an acerbic analysis of claims made about divinities, but has nevertheless intrigued many later authors, including David Hume [q.v.]. The second portion of this text provides Pliny's account of a lethal herbal substance, probably opium or hemlock, which he argues is preferable to other means of suicide—self-starvation, jumping from a height, self-hanging, self-asphyxiation, self-drowning, and self-stabbing. What is significant here is Pliny's apparent distinction between violent and nonviolent means of suicide and his embrace of the latter for those who are "weary of life." This selection from Natural History *also continues with his observations about the degree of pain associated with specific illnesses, in which cases sufferers sometimes seek suicide.*

Sources

Pliny, *The Natural History of Pliny*, Book II, ch. 5, "Of God"; Book II, ch. 63, "Nature of the Earth"; Book 25, ch. 7, "What Diseases are Attended with the Greatest Pain." John Bostock and H. T. Riley, eds. and trs., London: Taylor and Francis, 1855, available online at www.perseus.tufts.edu from the Perseus Digital Library at Tufts University.

from NATURAL HISTORY

Of God

I consider it, therefore, an indication of human weakness to inquire into the figure and form of God. For whatever God be, if there be any other God, and wherever he exists, he is all sense, all sight, all hearing, all life, all mind, and all within himself. To believe that there are a number of Gods, derived from the virtues and vices of man, as Chastity, Concord, Understanding, Hope, Honour, Clemency, and Fidelity; or, according to the opinion of Democritus, that there are only two, Punishment and Reward, indicates still greater folly. Human nature, weak and frail as it is, mindful of its own infirmity, has made these divisions, so that every one might have recourse to that which he supposed himself to stand more particularly in need of. Hence we find different names employed by different nations; the inferior deities are arranged in classes, and diseases and plagues are deified, in consequence of our anxious wish to propitiate them. It was from this cause that a temple was dedicated to Fever, at the public expense, on the Palatine Hill, and to Orbona, near the Temple of the Lares, and that an altar was elected to Good Fortune on the Esquiline. Hence we may understand how it comes to pass that there is a greater population of the Celestials than of human beings, since each individual makes a

separate God for himself, adopting his own Juno and his own Genius. And there are nations who make Gods of certain animals, and even certain obscene things, which are not to be spoken of, swearing by stinking meats and such like. To suppose that marriages are contracted between the Gods, and that, during so long a period, there should have been no issue from them, that some of them should be old and always grey-headed and others young and like children, some of a dark complexion, winged, lame, produced from eggs, living and dying on alternate days, is sufficiently puerile and foolish. But it is the height of impudence to imagine, that adultery takes place between them, that they have contests and quarrels, and that there are Gods of theft and of various crimes. To assist man is to be a God; this is the path to eternal glory. This is the path which the Roman nobles formerly pursued, and this is the path which is now pursued by the greatest ruler of our age, Vespasian Augustus, he who has come to the relief of an exhausted empire, as well as by his sons. This was the ancient mode of remunerating those who deserved it, to regard them as Gods. For the names of all the Gods, as well as of the stars that I have mentioned above, have been derived from their services to mankind. And with respect to Jupiter and Mercury, and the rest of the celestial nomenclature, who does not admit that they have reference to certain natural phenomena? But it is ridiculous to suppose, that the great head of all things, whatever it be, pays any regard to human affairs. Can we believe, or rather can there be any doubt, that it is not polluted by such a disagreeable and complicated office?

Nature of the Earth

Next comes the earth, on which alone of all parts of nature we have bestowed the name that implies maternal veneration. It is appropriated to man as the heavens are to God. She receives us at our birth, nourishes us when born, and ever afterwards supports us; lastly, embracing us in her bosom when we are rejected by the rest of nature, she then covers us with especial tenderness; rendered sacred to us, inasmuch as she renders us sacred, bearing our monuments and titles, continuing our names, and extending our memory, in opposition to the shortness of life. In our anger we imprecate her on those who are now no more, as if we were ignorant that she is the only being who can never be angry with man. The water passes into showers, is concreted into hail, swells into rivers, is precipitated in torrents; the air is condensed into clouds, rages in squalls; but the earth, kind, mild, and indulgent as she is, and always ministering to the wants of mortals, how many things do we compel her to produce spontaneously! What odours and flowers, nutritive juices, forms and colours! With what good faith does she render back all that has been entrusted to her! It is the vital spirit which must bear the blame of producing noxious animals; for the earth is constrained to receive the seeds of them, and to support them when they are produced. The fault lies in the evil nature which generates them. The earth will no longer harbour a serpent after it has attacked any one, and thus she even demands punishment in the name of those who are indifferent about it themselves. She pours forth a profusion of medicinal plants, and is always producing something for the use of man. We may even suppose, that it is out of compassion to us that she has ordained certain substances to be poisonous, in order that when we are weary of life, hunger, a mode of death the most foreign to the kind disposition of the earth, might not consume us by a slow decay, that precipices might not lacerate our mangled bodies, that the unseemly punishment of the halter may not torture us, by stopping the breath of one who seeks his own destruction, or that we may not seek our

death in the ocean, and become food for our graves, or that our bodies may not be gashed by steel. On this account it is that nature has produced a substance which is very easily taken, and by which life is extinguished, the body remaining undefiled and retaining all its blood, and only causing a degree of thirst. And when it is destroyed by this means, neither bird nor beast will touch the body, but he who has perished by his own hands is reserved for the earth.

What Diseases are Attended with the Greatest Pain

It would seem almost an act of folly to attempt to determine which of these diseases is attended with the most excruciating pain, seeing that everyone is of the opinion that the malady with which for the moment he himself is afflicted, is the most excruciating and insupportable. The general experience, however, of the present age has come to the conclusion, that the most agonizing torments are those attendant upon strangury, resulting from calculi in the bladder; next to them, those arising from maladies of the stomach; and in the third place, those caused by pains and affections of the head; for it is more generally in these cases, we find, and not in others, that patients are tempted to commit suicide.

For my own part, I am surprised that the Greek authors have gone so far as to give a description of noxious plants even; in using which term, I wish it to be understood that I do not mean the poisonous plants merely; for such is our tenure of life that death is often a port of refuge to even the best of men. We meet too, with one case of a somewhat similar nature, where M. Varro speaks of Servius Clodius, a member of the Equestrian order, being so dreadfully tormented with gout, that he had his legs rubbed all over with poisons, the result of which was, that from that time forward all sensation, equally with all pain, was deadened in those parts of his body. But what excuse, I say, can there be for making the world acquainted with plants, the only result of the use of which is to derange the intellect, to produce abortion, and to cause numerous other effects equally pernicious? So far as I am concerned, I shall describe neither abortives nor philtres, bearing in mind, as I do, that Lucullus, that most celebrated general, died of the effects of a philtre. Nor shall I speak of other ill-omened devices of magic, unless it be to give warning against them, or to expose them, for I most emphatically condemn all faith and belief in them. It will suffice for me, and I shall have abundantly done my duty, if I point out those plants which were made for the benefit of mankind, and the properties of which have been discovered in the lapse of time.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH (c. 35/50–c. 107)

Epistle: To the Romans

Saint Ignatius of Antioch (also known as Ignatius Theophoros), one of the Apostolic Fathers believed to have been in contact with the Apostles or received instruction from their disciples, served as

bishop of Antioch from the late 60s to the early 100s. Early traditions hold that he was converted to Christianity by the Apostle John and consecrated as bishop by Peter and Paul. The exact date of Ignatius' birth is unknown, but it was probably about 35 A.D., *perhaps as late as 50, in Syria; he became bishop of Antioch around the year 69. Little is known about Ignatius' life except what can be distilled from the seven letters he wrote on his journey in captivity, between his arrest in Antioch and—though this is not certain—his arrival in Rome. When Ignatius reached Rome, according to tradition, he was martyred for the faith: he refused to allow the faithful to obtain his release and was killed by two ravenous lions in the Colosseum, who left in the bloody sand only a few of the larger bones. The dates given for his death range from 98 to 117, with 107 the most likely. Ignatius is revered not only in the Roman Catholic Church but also in the independent West Syrian Church centered in Damascus, and almost every patriarch in the latter since 1293 bears the surname Ignatius in his honor.*

Ignatius' letters—most of them given to fellow bishops for their churches—warn against heresy and urge Christian unity. In this letter to the Romans, one of the seven believed to be authentic rather than forged (as some clearly were) and his last letter from Smyrna, Ignatius argues against being saved from martyrdom, which he welcomes because, he believes, it will bring him into union with Jesus Christ. He foresees that his body will become as "God's wheat"—ground by the teeth of wild beasts, a sacrifice to God. Ignatius stresses the voluntary nature of his death and his complete willingness to die.

Perhaps as much as any call to martyrdom in early Christianity, Ignatius' evident eagerness for death among the lions can be seen by later readers as challenging the distinction between martyrdom and suicide. Ignatius does not say that he desires to die simpliciter, *a wish that might be interpreted as suicidal but only that he would rather die and come to Christ more than anything else. He clearly does not seek death out of despair, something also often associated with suicide. But he does say that if the beasts do not attack him, he will "compel them" to do so—that is, incite or force (ἐγὼ προσβιάσομαι) the beasts to kill him. Indeed, he asks pardon for this. Ignatius' expression thus raises the question of whether in this way he would be deliberately bringing about his own death, and what causal, as well as volitional, role he might play.*

Source

Ignatius of Antioch, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans," short version, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. I: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1867, also available online at www.ccel.org from the Christian Classic Ethereal Library, Calvin College.

from EPISTLE: TO THE ROMANS

Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to the Church which has obtained mercy, through the majesty of the Most High Father, and Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son; the Church which is beloved and enlightened by the will of Him that willeth all things which are according to the love of Jesus Christ our God, which also presides in the place of the report of the Romans, worthy of God, worthy of honour, worthy of the highest happiness, worthy of praise, worthy of obtaining her every desire, worthy of being deemed holy, and which presides over love, is named

from Christ, and from the Father, which I also salute in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father: to those who are united, both according to the flesh and spirit, to every one of His commandments; who are filled inseparably with the grace of God, and are purified from every strange taint, [I wish] abundance of happiness unblameably, in Jesus Christ our God.

Through prayer to God I have obtained the privilege of seeing your most worthy faces, and have even been granted more than I requested; for I hope as a prisoner in Christ Jesus to salute you, if indeed it be the will of God that I be thought worthy of attaining unto the end. For the beginning has been well ordered, if I may obtain grace to cling to my lot without hindrance unto the end. For I am afraid of your love, lest it should do me an injury. For it is easy for you to accomplish what you please; but it is difficult for me to attain to God, if ye spare me.

For it is not my desire to act towards you as a man-pleaser, but as pleasing God, even as also ye please Him. For neither shall I ever have such [another] opportunity of attaining to God; nor will ye, if ye shall now be silent, ever be entitled to the honour of a better work. For if ye are silent concerning me, I shall become God's; but if you show your love to my flesh, I shall again have to run my race. Pray, then, do not seek to confer any greater favour upon me than that I be sacrificed to God while the altar is still prepared; that, being gathered together in love, ye may sing praise to the Father, through Christ Jesus, that God has deemed me, the bishop of Syria, worthy to be sent for from the east unto the west. It is good to set from the world unto God, that I may rise again to Him.

Ye have never envied any one; ye have taught others. Now I desire that those things may be confirmed [by your conduct], which in your instructions ye enjoin [on others]. Only request in my behalf both inward and outward strength, that I may not only speak, but [truly] will; and that I may not merely be called a Christian, but really be found to be one. For if I be truly found [a Christian], I may also be called one, and be then deemed faithful, when I shall no longer appear to the world. Nothing visible is eternal. "For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." For our God, Jesus Christ, now that He is with the Father, is all the more revealed [in His glory]. Christianity is not a thing of silence only, but also of [manifest] greatness.

I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless ye hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable good-will towards me. Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]. I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.

From Syria even unto Rome I fight with beasts, both by land and sea, both by night and day, being bound to ten leopards, I mean a band of soldiers, who, even when they receive benefits, show themselves all the worse. But I am the more instructed by their injuries [to act as a disciple of Christ]; "yet am I not thereby justified." May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour

me speedily, and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. But if they be unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so. Pardon me [in this]: I know what is for my benefit. Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ.

All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die in behalf of Jesus Christ, than to reign over all the ends of the earth. "For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?" Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. This is the gain which is laid up for me. Pardon me, brethren: do not hinder me from living, do not wish to keep me in a state of death; and while I desire to belong to God, do not ye give me over to the world. Suffer me to obtain pure light: when I have gone thither, I shall indeed be a man of God. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has Him within himself, let him consider what I desire, and let him have sympathy with me, as knowing how I am straitened.

The prince of this world would fain carry me away, and corrupt my disposition towards God. Let none of you, therefore, who are [in Rome] help him; rather be ye on my side, that is, on the side of God. Do not speak of Jesus Christ, and yet set your desires on the world. Let not envy find a dwelling-place among you; nor even should I, when present with you, exhort you to it, be ye persuaded to listen to me, but rather give credit to those things which I now write to you. For though I am alive while I write to you, yet I am eager to die. My love has been crucified, and there is no fire in me desiring to be fed; but there is within me a water that liveth and speaketh, saying to me inwardly, Come to the Father. I have no delight in corruptible food, nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

I no longer wish to live after the manner of men, and my desire shall be fulfilled if ye consent. Be ye willing, then, that ye also may have your desires fulfilled. I entreat you in this brief letter; do ye give credit to me. Jesus Christ will reveal these things to you, [so that ye shall know] that I speak truly. He is the mouth altogether free from falsehood, by which the Father has truly spoken. Pray ye for me, that I may attain [the object of my desire]. I have not written to you according to the flesh, but according to the will of God. If I shall suffer, ye have wished [well] to me; but if I am rejected, ye have hated me.

Remember in your prayers the Church in Syria, which now has God for its shepherd, instead of me. Jesus Christ alone will oversee it, and your love [will also regard it]. But as for me, I am ashamed to be counted one of them; for indeed I am not worthy, as being the very last of them, and one born out of due time. But I have obtained mercy to be somebody, if I shall attain to God. My spirit salutes you, and the love of the Churches that have received me in the name of Jesus Christ, and not as a mere passer-by. For even those Churches which were not near to me in the way, I mean according to the flesh, have gone before me, city by city, [to meet me.]

Now I write these things to you from Smyrna by the Ephesians, who are deservedly most happy. There is also with me, along with many others, Crocus, one dearly beloved by me. As to those who have gone before me from Syria to Rome for the glory of God, I believe that you are acquainted with them; to whom, [then,] do ye make known that I am at hand. For they are all

worthy, both of God and of you; and it is becoming that you should refresh them in all things. I have written these things unto you, on the day before the ninth of the Kalends of September (that is, on the twenty-third day of August). Fare ye well to the end, in the patience of Jesus Christ. Amen.

JOSEPHUS (37–c. 100)

from *The Jewish War*

The Defeat at Jotapata ***(in Archive only)***
The Fall of Masada **(*expanded in Archive*)**

Originally born Joseph ben Matthias in Jerusalem, Titus Flavius Josephus was a Jewish military commander and then historian. He was of priestly and royal descent, educated in both Hebrew and Greek literature. At age 16, he went into the desert, staying with the hermit Bannus; after this, he joined the Pharisees, and in 66 A.D., he reluctantly (or so he claims) took part in the Jewish revolt against Rome. After the Roman siege of Jotapata, Josephus, who as governor of Galilee led its defense, was captured and imprisoned in a Roman camp. He was later freed by the emperor Vespasian and became a Roman citizen. Adopting the Vespasian family name of Flavius, Josephus endeavored to act as a mediator between the Romans and the Jews during the assault on Jerusalem by Titus in the year 70. His attempts at mediation were unsuccessful, as he was distrusted by both the Jews as a traitor and the Romans for being a Jew. Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Roman legions. Josephus returned to Rome where, with imperial patronage, he dedicated himself to writing until his death, sometime between 93 and 100 A.D.

Josephus wrote several works including the Antiquities of the Jews *(c. 94; a history of the Jewish people from the Creation to 66 A.D., in 20 books), an* Autobiography *(c. 99), and* Against Apion *(c. 97; a defense of the Jewish people and their religion), but he is perhaps best known for his historical account of the Jewish revolt against Rome,* The Jewish War *(75–79). Much of the account of the revolt is taken from Josephus' firsthand experiences. The influence of his Hebrew and Greek education, and of his Greek assistants, is also evident in its pages. Perhaps in an effort to defend himself against charges of treason, Josephus paints the Jews as their own worst enemies for being unwilling to bow to Roman might. While Josephus' historical writings suffer from inaccuracy and frequent exaggeration, and while the details of matters affecting himself, as in the accounts of suicide presented here, may be particularly unreliable—probably at least in part a fabrication designed to please his Roman masters—they nevertheless provide a direct look at the relationship between the Jews and the secular Roman world.*

The first of the two selections from The Jewish War *is an account of the siege of the fortress of Jotapata. Josephus, the military leader at the fortress, successfully held off a Roman assault for 47 days, but the city fell to Vespasian on July 20, 67. Josephus hid for safety in a cave with 40*

other Jews. When discovered by the Romans three days later, Josephus was on the point of surrendering, but his companions urged him to die rather than do so: "we will lend you a right hand and a sword." Josephus tried to persuade them of the wrongness of suicide; his discourse is presented here, replete with Greek arguments against suicide. He alludes to the Athenian law that the hand of a suicide was to be cut off and buried separately and to a variation of the Pythagorean argument used by Plato that man is the property of God and should not "fly from the best of masters." He also anticipates a natural-law argument later used by Thomas Aquinas that everything seeks to keep itself in being. Nevertheless, Josephus' companions insisted on death. Josephus quickly devised a plan whereby each surrendered his throat to one before him, and Josephus, one of the last two in line, escaped.

The second selection is Josephus' account of the siege of the fortress of Masada. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the fortress—built in a seemingly impregnable position at the top of a massive rock promontory on the western shore of the Dead Sea—became one of the last outposts for the Jewish nationalists known as the Zealots. On May 2, 73, during a major offensive by the Roman army, 960 Zealot revolutionaries under the command of Eleazar chose to commit mass suicide rather than to yield to the Roman attack. Eleazar's arguments favoring suicide are counterparts to those Josephus had used against it: voluntary death gives liberty to the soul; it preserves honor and protects the pride of the Jewish nation; it spares one's family and oneself from slavery and torture if captured. Incited by Eleazar, each husband killed his wife and children and was then killed by the next man in line; the last man willingly killed himself. Only two women and five children, hiding in the underground aqueducts, survived to tell the tale.

Sources

Josephus, *The Jewish War*, tr. H. St. J. Thackeray, London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927, Vol. 2 (I-III), 1927; Vol. 3 (IV-V), 1928, odd-numbered pp., Vol. 2, 665–689, Vol. 3, 591–619. Book III: The Defeat at Jotapata; Book VII: The Fall of Masada.

from THE JEWISH WAR

The Fall of Masada

The Roman general [Silva] having now completed his wall surrounding the whole exterior of the place [Masada] and taken the strictest precautions that none should escape, applied himself to the siege. . . . Silva, having further provided himself with a great battering-ram, ordered it to be directed without intermission against the wall, and having, though with difficulty, succeeded in effecting a breach, brought it down in ruins. . . . The Romans . . . blessed by God's aid, returned rejoicing to their camp, with the determination of attacking the enemy on the morrow; and throughout that night they kept stricter watch lest any of them should secretly escape.

. . . However, neither did Eleazar himself contemplate flight, nor did he intend to permit any other to do so. Seeing the wall consumed in the flames, unable to devise any further means of deliverance or gallant endeavour, and setting before his eyes what the Romans, if victorious,

would inflict on them, their children and their wives, he deliberated on the death of all. And, judging, as matters stood, this course the best, he assembled the most doughty of his comrades and incited them to the deed by such words as these:

"Long since, my brave men, we determined, neither to serve the Romans nor any other—save God, for He alone is man's true and righteous Lord; and now the time has come which bids us verify that resolution by our actions. At this crisis let us not disgrace ourselves; we who in the past refused to submit even to a slavery involving no peril, let us not now, along with slavery, deliberately accept the irreparable penalties awaiting us if we are to fall alive into Roman hands. For as we were the first of all to revolt, so are we the last in arms against them. Moreover, I believe that it is God who has granted us this favour, that we have it in our power to die nobly and in freedom—a privilege denied to others who have met with unexpected defeat. Our fate at break of day is certain capture, but there is still the free choice of a noble death with those we hold most dear. For our enemies, fervently though they pray to take us alive, can no more prevent this than we can now hope to defeat them in battle. Maybe, indeed, we ought from the very first—when, having chosen to assert our liberty, we invariably experienced such hard treatment from one another, and still harder from our foes—we ought, I say, to have read God's purpose and to have recognized that the Jewish race, once beloved of Him, had been doomed to perdition. For had he continued to be gracious, or but lightly incensed, he would never have overlooked such wholesale destruction or have abandoned His most holy city to be burnt and razed to the ground by our enemies. But did we forsooth hope that we alone of all the Jewish nation would survive and preserve our freedom, as persons guiltless towards God and without a hand in crime—we who had even been the instructors of the rest? Mark, now, how He exposes the vanity of our expectations, by visiting us with such dire distress as exceeds all that we could anticipate. For not even the impregnable nature of this fortress has availed to save us; nay, though ample provisions are ours, piles of arms, and a superabundance of every other requisite, yet we have been deprived, manifestly by God Himself, of all hope of deliverance. For it was not of their own accord that those flames which were driving against the enemy turned back upon the wall constructed by us; no, all this betokens wrath at the many wrongs which we madly dared to inflict upon our countrymen. The penalty for those crimes let us pay not to our bitterest foes, the Romans, but to God through the act of our own hands. It will be more tolerable than the other. Let our wives thus die undishonoured, our children unacquainted with slavery; and, when they are gone, let us render a generous service to each other, preserving our liberty as a noble winding-sheet. But first let us destroy our chattels and the fortress by fire; for the Romans, well I know, will be grieved to lose at once our persons and the lucre. Our provisions only let us spare; for they will testify, when we are dead, that it was not want which subdued us, but that in keeping with our initial resolve, we preferred death to slavery."

Thus spoke Eleazar; but his words did not touch the hearts of all hearers alike. Some, indeed, were eager to respond and all but filled with delight at the thought of a death so noble; but others, softer-hearted, were moved with compassion for their wives and families, and doubtless also by the vivid prospect of their own end, and their tears as they looked upon one another revealed their unwillingness of heart. Eleazar, seeing them flinching and their courage breaking down in face of so vast a scheme, feared that their whimpers and tears might unman even those who had listened to his speech with fortitude. Far, therefore, from slackening in his exhortation, he roused

himself and, fired with mighty fervour, essayed a higher flight of oratory on the immortality of the soul. Indignantly protesting and with eyes intently fixed on those in tears, he exclaimed:

"Deeply, indeed, was I deceived in thinking that I should have brave men as associates in our struggles for freedom—men determined to live with honour or to die. But you, it seems, were no better than the common herd in valour or in courage, you who are afraid even of that death that will deliver you from the direst ills, when in such a cause you ought neither to hesitate an instant nor wait for a counselor. For from of old, since the first dawn of intelligence, we have been continually taught by those precepts, ancestral and divine—confirmed by the deeds and noble spirit of our forefathers—that life, not death, is man's misfortune. For it is death which gives liberty to the soul and permits it to depart to its own pure abode, there to be free from all calamity; but so long as it is imprisoned in a mortal body and tainted with all its miseries, it is, in sober truth, dead, for association with what is mortal ill befits that which is divine. True, the soul possesses great capacity, even while incarcerated in the body; for it makes the latter its organ of perception, invisibly swaying it and directing it onward in its actions beyond the range of mortal nature. But it is not until, freed from the weight that drags it down to earth and clings about it, the soul is restored to its proper sphere, that it enjoys a blessed energy and a power untrammelled on every side, remaining, like God Himself, invisible to human eyes. For even while in the body it is withdrawn from view: unperceived it comes and unseen it again departs, itself of a nature one and incorruptible, but a cause of change to the body. For whatever the soul has touched lives and flourishes, whatever it abandons withers and dies; so abundant is her wealth of immortality. . . .

. . . "Yet, even had we from the first been schooled in the opposite doctrine and taught that man's highest blessing is life and that death is a calamity, still the crisis is one that calls upon us to bear it with a stout heart, since it is by God's will and of necessity that we are to die. For long since, so it seems, God passed this decree against the whole Jewish race in common, that we must quit this life if we would not use it aright. Do not attach the blame to yourselves, nor the credit to the Romans, that this war with them has been the ruin of us all; for it was not their might that brought these things to pass, but the intervention of some more powerful cause has afforded them the semblance of victory. . . .

"Those men who fell in battle may fitly be felicitated, for they died defending, not betraying, liberty; but the multitudes in Roman hands who would not pity? Who would not rush to his death ere he shared their fate? Of them some have perished on the rack or tortured by fire and scourge; others, half-devoured by wild beasts, have been preserved alive to provide them with a second repast, after affording merriment and sport for their foes. But most miserable of all must be reckoned those still alive, who have often prayed for death and are denied the boon.

"And where now is that great city, the mother-city of the whole Jewish race, intrenched behind all those lines of ramparts, screened by all those forts and massive towers, that could scarce contain her munitions of war, and held all those myriads of defenders? What has become of her that was believed to have God for her founder? Uprooted from her base she has been swept away, and the sole memorial of her remaining is that of the slain sti1l quartered in her ruins! Hapless old men sit beside the ashes of the shrine and a few women, reserved by the enemy for basest outrage.

"Which of us, taking these things to heart, could bear to behold the sun, even could he live secure from peril? Who such a foe to his country, so unmanly, so fond of life, as not to regret that he is still alive to-day? Nay, I would that we had all been dead ere ever we saw that holy city razed by an enemy's hands, that sacred sanctuary so profanely uprooted! But seeing

that we have been beguiled by a not ignoble hope, that we might perchance find means of avenging her of her foes, and now that hope has vanished and left us alone in our distress, let us hasten to die honourably; let us have pity on ourselves, our children and our wives, while it is still in our power to find pity from ourselves. For we were born for death, we and those whom we have begotten; and this even the fortunate cannot escape. But outrage and servitude and the sight of our wives being led to shame with their children—these are no necessary evils imposed by nature on mankind, but befall, through their own cowardice, those who, having the chance of forestalling them by death, refuse to take it. But we, priding ourselves on our courage, revolted from the Romans, and now at the last, when they offered us our lives, we refused the offer. Who then can fail to foresee their wrath if they take us alive? Wretched will be the young whose vigorous frames can sustain many tortures, wretched the more advanced in years whose age is incapable of bearing such calamities. Is a man to see his wife led off to violation, to hear the voice of his child crying 'Father!' when his own hands are bound? No, while those hands are free and grasp the sword, let them render an honourable service. Unenslaved by the foe let us die, as free men with our children and wives let us quit this life together! This our laws enjoin, this our wives and children implore of us. The need for this is of God's sending, the reverse of this is the Romans' desire, and their fear is lest a single one of us should die before capture. Haste we then to leave them, instead of their hoped-for enjoyment at securing us, amazement at our death and admiration of our fortitude."

He would have pursued his exhortation but was cut short by his hearers, who, overpowered by some uncontrollable impulse, were all in haste to do the deed. Like men possessed they went their way, each eager to outstrip his neighbour and deeming it a signal proof of courage and sound judgement not to be seen among the last: so ardent the passion that had seized them to slaughter their wives, their little ones and themselves. Nor, as might have been expected, did their ardour cool when they approached the task: inflexibly they held to the resolution, which they had formed while listening to the address, and though personal emotion and affection were alive in all, reason which they knew had consulted best for their loved ones, was paramount. For, while they caressed and embraced their wives and took their children in their arms, clinging in tears to those parting kisses, at that same instant, as though served by hands other than their own, they accomplished their purpose, having the thought of the ills they would endure under the enemy's hands to console them for their constraint in killing them. And in the end not one was found a truant in so daring a deed: all carried through their task with their dearest ones. Wretched victims of necessity, to whom to slay with their own hands their own wives and children seemed the lightest of evils! Unable, indeed, any longer to endure their anguish at what they had done, and feeling that they wronged the slain by surviving them if it were but for a moment, they quickly piled together all the stores and set them on fire; then, having chosen by lot ten of their number to dispatch the rest, they laid themselves down each beside his prostrate wife and children, and, flinging their arms around them, offered their throats in readiness for the executants of the melancholy office. These, having unswervingly slaughtered all, ordained the same rule of the lot for one another, that he on whom it fell should slay first the nine and then himself last of all; such mutual confidence had they all that neither in acting nor in suffering would one differ from another. Finally, then, the nine bared their throats, and the last solitary survivor, after surveying the prostrate multitude, to see whether haply amid the

shambles there were yet one left who needed his hand, and finding that all were slain, set the palace ablaze, and then collecting his strength drove his sword clean through his body and fell beside his family. They had died in the belief that they had left not a soul of them alive to fall into Roman hands; but an old woman and another, a relative of Eleazar, superior in sagacity and training to most of her sex, with five children, escaped by concealing themselves in the subterranean aqueducts, while the rest were absorbed in the slaughter. The victims numbered nine hundred and sixty, including women and children; and the tragedy occurred on the fifteenth of the month Xanthicus.

The Romans, expecting further opposition, were by daybreak under arms and, having with gangways formed bridges of approach from the earthworks, advanced to the assault. Seeing none of the enemy but on all sides an awful solitude, and flames within and silence, they were at a loss to conjecture what had happened. At length, as if for a signal to shoot, they shouted, to call forth haply any of those within. The shout was heard by the women-folk, who, emerging from the caverns, informed the Romans how matters stood, one of the two lucidly reporting both the speech and how the deed was done. But it was with difficulty that they listened to her, incredulous of such amazing fortitude; meanwhile they endeavoured to extinguish the flames and soon cutting a passage through them entered the palace. Here encountering the mass of slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution.

PLUTARCH
(c. 46–c. 120)

Moralia: The Women of Miletus
Parallel Lives: Cato the Younger

Plutarch, Greek biographer and essayist, sometimes called the founder of modern biography, chronicled the lives of many of the great and celebrated Greeks and Romans. Born in Chaeronea in Boeotia, Plutarch was educated in Athens and traveled widely. He was the author of some 227 works, including the Moralia, *a collection of didactic essays and dialogues on a wide range of topics, and the* Parallel Lives, *biographies and character studies of soldiers and statesmen among the Greeks and Romans, most in pairs, from the legendary age of Theseus and Romulus down to his own time. Plutarch's philosophical thinking can be described as an eclectic Platonism, with elements borrowed from many other philosophical traditions. For at least 20 years, Plutarch served as a priest at the temple at Delphi; later in life, he returned to Chaeronea and served as a city official.*

Included in Plutarch's Moralia *is the collection of stories,* Mulierum Virtutes, *known as* On the Virtues of Women *or* The Bravery of Women, *that Plutarch composed for his friend Clea, who held*

high office among the priestesses at Delphi where he himself was a priest. In it, Plutarch relates an epidemic of suicide (said to have occurred in 277 B.C.) among the young women of Miletus, presumably girls around the age of puberty when they were about to be married. The story is repeated by many other classical authors, including Aulus Gellius, who attributes it to another work of Plutarch's, now lost, called On the Soul. *Although the measure may be a later addition, the story is well known for its account of an effective deterrent to suicide: public shame.*

In the Lives, *Plutarch chronicles the suicide of the Roman statesman Marcus Portius Cato, known as Cato the Younger (95–46 B.C.), during the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. As a leader, Cato developed a reputation for honesty, frugality, and personal integrity, and had gained considerable influence among the Roman people; he was considered a potential political threat by the First Triumvirate (Caesar, Pompey, and Marcus Crassus), who sent him to Sicily for two years to try to remove him from politics. Cato sided with Pompey during the civil war in 49 B.C.; he tried to defend Sicily and in the end maintained a hopeless defense against Caesar in the North African city of Utica, near modern Tunis. As Caesar was about to take the city, Cato committed suicide by falling on his sword—though the act proved initially ineffective and the wound was sewn closed by a physician; it was not until he awoke and ripped open the wound that he died.*

In this biography of Cato, Plutarch represents him as motivated by two principal reasons, both consonant with Stoic thinking (though Plutarch himself was generally opposed to Stoicism): Cato considers suicide an act of self-control and personal freedom, a way of avoiding the indignity he would suffer at Caesar's hand; he also sees his suicide as a way of showing the Roman people that they never need to succumb to slavery, even in defeat. This does not mean, however, that Cato urged suicide upon his people too; rather, he remained behind after they sailed as a model of principled resistance. Plutarch's account also stresses the resoluteness of purpose that he sees as characterizing Cato's suicide, including Cato's allowing his family to understand his intentions, his reading of Plato's Phaedo *(twice), his resistance to his son's paternalism in hiding the sword, and his determination to complete the deed even after its initial failure. Following the suicide, the people of Utica honored Cato, and his reputation for incorruptibility became legendary.*

Plutarch's accounts have had considerable later influence. Shakespeare [q.v.] followed the Lives, *which had first been translated into English in 1579, closely in his Roman history plays, sometimes borrowing passages from Plutarch with only minor changes; Plutarch's work had considerable influence on Shakespeare's conception of the tragic hero that is evident, for example, in* Antony and Cleopatra. *And while some later commentators have depicted Cato's suicide as immoral, many have used it as an example par excellence of courage; even Immanuel Kant [q.v.], in his* Lectures on Ethics, *says that "appearances are in its favor," though he hastens to say that it is "the only example which has given the world the opportunity of defending suicide."*

Sources

Plutarch's Moralia: "Bravery of Women," XI, tr. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949, p. 509; *Plutarch's Lives*: "Cato the Younger," LXVIII-LXXIII, tr. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919, Vol. 8, odd-numbered pp. 401–409.

from MORALIA: THE WOMEN OF MILETUS

Once upon a time a dire and strange trouble took possession of the young women in Miletus for some unknown cause. The most popular conjecture was that the air had acquired a distracting and infectious constitution, and that this operated to produce in them an alteration and derangement of mind. At any rate, a yearning for death and an insane impulse toward hanging suddenly fell upon all of them, and many managed to steal away and hang themselves. Arguments and tears of parents and comforting words of friends availed nothing, but they circumvented every device and cunning effort of their watchers in making away with themselves. The malady seemed to be of divine origin and beyond human help, until, on the advice of a man of sense, an ordinance was proposed that the women who hanged themselves should be carried naked through the market-place to their burial. And when this ordinance was passed it not only checked, but stopped completely, the young women from killing themselves. Plainly a high testimony to natural goodness and to virtue is the desire to guard against ill repute, and the fact that the women who had no deterrent sense of shame when facing the most terrible of all things in the world, death and pain, yet could not abide nor bear the thought of disgrace which would come after death.

from PARALLEL LIVES: CATO THE YOUNGER

Thus the supper came to an end, and after walking about with his friends as he usually did after supper, he gave the officers of the watch the proper orders, and then retired to his chamber, but not until he had embraced his son and each of his friends with more than his wonted kindness, and thus awakened anew their suspicions of what was to come. After entering his chamber and lying down, he took up Plato's dialogue "On the Soul" [the *Phaedo*], and when he had gone through the greater part of the treatise, he looked up above his head, and not seeing his sword hanging there (for his son had taken it away while Cato was still at supper), called a servant and asked him who had taken the weapon. The servant made no answer, and Cato returned to his book; and a little while after, as if in no haste of hurry, but merely looking for his sword, he bade the servant fetch it. But as there was some delay, and no one brought the weapon, he finished reading his book, and this time called his servants one by one and in louder tones demanded his sword. One of them he smote on the mouth with his fist, and bruised his own hand, angrily crying now in loud tones that his son and his servants were betraying him into the hands of the enemy without arms. At last his son ran in weeping, together with his friends, and after embracing him, betook himself to lamentations and entreaties. But Cato, rising to his feet, took on a solemn look, and said: "When and where, without my knowledge, have I been adjudged a madman, that no one instructs or tries to convert me in matters wherein I am thought to have made

bad decisions, but I am prevented from using my own judgement, and have my arms taken from me? Why, generous boy, dost thou not also tie thy father's hands behind his back, that Caesar may find me unable to defend myself when he comes? Surely, to kill myself I have no need of a sword, when I have only to hold my breath a little while, or dash my head against the wall, and death will come."

As Cato said these words the young man went out sobbing, and all the rest also, except Demetrius and Apollonides. These alone remained, and with these Cato began to talk, now in gentler tones. "I suppose," said he, "that ye also have decided to detain in life by force a man as old as I am, and to sit by him in silence and keep watch of him: or are ye come with the plea that it is neither shameful nor dreadful for Cato, when he has no other way of salvation, to await salvation at the hands of his enemy? Why, then, do ye not speak persuasively and convert me to this doctrine, that we may cast away those good old opinions and arguments which have been part of our very lives, be made wiser through Caesar's efforts, and therefore be more grateful to him? And yet I, certainly, have come to no resolve about myself; but when I have come to a resolve, I must be master of the course which I decide to take. And I shall come to a resolve with your aid, as I might say, since I shall reach it with the aid of those doctrines which ye also adopt as philosophers. So go away with a good courage, and bid my son not to try force with his father when he cannot persuade him."

Without making any reply to this, but bursting into tears, Demetrius and Apollonides slowly withdrew. Then the sword was sent in, carried by a little child, and Cato took it, drew it from its sheath, and examined it. And when he saw that its point was keen and its edge still sharp, he said: "Now I am my own master." Then he laid down the sword and resumed his book, and he is said to have read it through twice. Afterwards he fell into so deep a sleep that those outside the chamber heard him. But about midnight he called two of his freedmen, Cleanthes the physician, and Butas, who was his chief agent in public matters. Butas he sent down to the sea, to find out whether all had set sail successfully, and bring him word; while to the physician he gave his hand to bandage, since it was inflamed by the blow that he had given the slave. This made everybody more cheerful, since they thought he had a mind to live. In a little while Butas came with tidings that all had set sail except Crassus, who was detained by some business or other, and he too was on the point of embarking; Butas reported also that a heavy storm and a high wind prevailed at sea. On hearing this, Cato groaned with pity for those in peril on the sea, and sent Butas down again, to find out whether anyone had been driven back by the storm and wanted any necessaries, and to report to him.

And now the birds were already beginning to sing, when he fell asleep again for a little while. And when Butas came and told him that the harbours were very quiet, he ordered him to close the door, throwing himself down upon his couch as if he were going to rest there for what still remained of the night. But when Butas had gone out, Cato drew his sword from its sheath and stabbed himself below the breast. His thrust, however, was somewhat feeble, owing to the inflammation in his hand, but in his death struggle fell from the couch and made a loud noise by overturning a geometrical abacus that stood near. His servants heard the noise and cried out, and his son at once ran in, together with his friends. They saw that he was smeared with blood, and that most of his bowels were protruding, but that he still had his eyes open and was alive; and they were terribly shocked. But the physician went to him and tried to replace his bowels, which remained uninjured, and to sew up the wound. Accordingly, when Cato recovered and became

aware of this, he pushed the physician away, tore his bowels with his hands, rent the wound still more, and so died.

Before one would have thought that all in the house could learn of the event, the three hundred were at the door, and a little later the people of Utica had assembled. With one voice they called Cato their saviour and benefactor, the only man who was free, the only one unvanquished. And this they continued to do even when word was brought that Caesar was approaching. But neither fear of the conqueror, nor a desire to flatter him, nor their mutual strife and dissension, could blunt their desire to honour Cato. They decked his body in splendid fashion, gave it an illustrious escort, and buried it near the sea, where a statue of him now stands, sword in hand. Then they turned their thoughts to their own salvation and that of their city.

When Caesar learned from people who came to him that Cato was remaining in Utica and not trying to escape, but that he was sending off the rest, while he himself, his companions, and his son, were fearlessly going up and down, he thought it difficult to discern the purpose of the man, but since he made the greatest account of him, he came on with his army in all haste. When, however, he heard of his death, he said thus much only, as we are told: "O Cato, I begrudge thee thy death; for thou didst begrudge me the sparing of thy life." For, in reality, if Cato could have consented to have his life spared by Caesar, he would not be thought to have defiled his own fair fame, but rather to have adorned that of Caesar. However, what would have happened is uncertain; though the milder course is to be conjectured on the part of Caesar.

When Cato died, he was forty-eight years old.

THE NEW TESTAMENT (c. 50–c. 125)

***Matthew:* The Death of Jesus and the Suicide of Judas**
***Acts:* Paul Prevents a Suicide**
***I Corinthians:* The Body as Temple**
***Philippians:* Paul in Prison: On the Desire to Die**

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*In addition to the texts of the Hebrew Bible [q.v.], known to Christians as the Old Testament, the Christian Bible also includes the books and letters known as the New Testament. These texts are accounts of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth (*c. *8–4* B.C. *to* c. *30–36* A.D.*) by his immediate disciples and subsequent followers, expressions of their faith in his divine and human nature as Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and the Son of God, as well as their understandings of the history of their tradition and God's purpose for the world. Preserved in* koine*, the Greek dialect common to the eastern Mediterranean regions, these 27 texts include the four gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the historical book of Acts, the letters by and attributed to Paul, letters*

from disciples, and the Apocalypse (Revelations) attributed to John. These texts from the 1st and possibly 2nd century A.D. *form the scriptures distinctive to Christianity, a new religion arising from Judaism that would distinguish itself from both Judaism and the Roman state religion, and within a few hundred years, would itself become the dominant religion in the West. The effort to compile a single, coherent collection of the authoritative early writings of this new religion began sometime during the last decades of the 2nd century, and it was not until the second half of the 4th century that the New Testament reached its settled, final shape.*

The texts presented here—from Matthew, Acts, I Corinthians, and Philippians—are placed in the order in which they occur in the canonical New Testament, though this does not reflect their dates of composition. The earliest, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, was written sometime between 50 and 60 A.D., *before he was imprisoned in Rome for the first time. Paul's first extant letter to the church at Corinth, I Corinthians, was written from Ephesus sometime around Easter, probably in the year 55, during one of his many missionary journeys. The Gospel of Matthew was composed between 80 and 90, and Acts, a history of the early church by the author of the gospel attributed to Luke, has been dated as early as 60 and as late as 125.*

The text presented here from Matthew describes the only suicide reported in the canonical gospels, that of Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 disciples. Judas had betrayed Jesus to the Roman authorities, a betrayal that led to Jesus' crucifixion. Although a different version of Judas's death, not involving suicide, can be found in Acts 1:18–20, the account in Matthew interprets Judas's self-hanging as a suicide of remorse. Some later commentators have seen Judas's suicide as an act of ultimate atonement for the sin of betrayal, although by the High Middle Ages, Judas's suicide was often seen as a greater sin than the betrayal itself. Acts also contains an account of the jailor in Philippi who, responsible for keeping Paul and Silas under close guard, attempts suicide when he believes they have escaped; it is Paul who prevents the jailor's suicide.

Paul's letters address many questions about church discipline and practice, questions of morality, and fundamental Christian doctrine. The passage from I Corinthians provides part of the theological basis for the Christian prohibition of suicide: the view that the body is the "temple of God," the place where the soul dwells, the site of the fusion between spirit and flesh that is the human person. Suicide is wrong in part because it destroys the body that is the seat of the soul.

Paul's Letter to the Philippians provides indirect insight into Christian attitudes about suicide. As many later writers (e.g., Angela of Foligno [q.v.]) also do, Paul describes his ambivalence about death: he desires to "depart and be with Christ," and he sees death and the afterlife it promises as "a gain"; but he also recognizes reasons for remaining in the body, reasons that persuade him that it is better not to end his life. This tension between the desire to die and the obligation to live remains of continuing concern in the Christian view of suicide throughout its later history.

Source

The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha, eds. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 1299–1301, 1414–1415, 1450, 1488.

from THE NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 26: 36–75; 27: 1-5: The Death of Jesus and the Suicide of Judas

Jesus then came with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there to pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. Distress and anguish overwhelmed him, and he said to them, 'My heart is ready to break with grief. Stop here, and stay awake with me.' Then he went on a little farther, threw himself down, and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet not my will but yours.'

He came back to the disciples and found them asleep; and he said to Peter, 'What! Could none of you stay awake with me for one hour? Stay awake, and pray that you may be spared the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

He went away a second time and prayed: 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done.' He came again and found them asleep, for their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away again and prayed a third time, using the same words as before.

Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Still asleep? Still resting? The hour has come! The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let us go! The traitor is upon us.'

He was still speaking when Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared, and with him a great crowd armed with swords and cudgels, sent by the chief priests and the elders of the nation. The traitor had given them this sign: 'The one I kiss is your man; seize him.' Going straight up to Jesus, he said, 'Hail, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus replied, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came forward, seized Jesus, and held him fast.

At that moment one of those with Jesus reached for his sword and drew it, and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. But Jesus said to him, 'Put up your sword. All who take the sword die by the sword. Do you suppose that I cannot appeal for help to my Father, and at once be sent more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say that this must happen?'

Then Jesus spoke to the crowd: 'Do you take me for a bandit, that you have come out with swords and cudgels to arrest me? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple, and you did not lay hands on me. But this has all happened to fulfil what the prophets wrote.'

Then the disciples all deserted him and ran away.

Jesus was led away under arrest to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and elders were assembled. Peter followed him at a distance till he came to the high priest's courtyard; he went in and sat down among the attendants, to see how it would all end.

The chief priests and the whole council tried to find some allegation against Jesus that would warrant a death sentence; but they failed to find one, though many came forward with false evidence. Finally two men alleged that he had said, 'I can pull down the temple of God, and rebuild it in three days.' At this the high priest rose and said to him, 'Have you no answer to the accusations that these witnesses bring against you?' But Jesus remained silent. The high priest then said, 'By the living God I charge you to tell us: are you the Messiah, the Son of God?' Jesus

replied, 'The words are yours. But I tell you this: from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven.' At these words the high priest tore his robes and exclaimed, 'This is blasphemy! Do we need further witnesses? You have just heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict!' 'He is guilty,' they answered; 'he should die.'

Then they spat in his face and struck him with their fists; some said, as they beat him, 'Now, Messiah, if you are a prophet, tell us who hit you.'

Meanwhile Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard when a servant-girl accosted him; 'You were with Jesus the Galilean,' she said. Peter denied it in front of them all. 'I do not know what you are talking about,' he said. He then went out to the gateway, where another girl, seeing him, said to the people there, 'He was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Once again he denied it, saying with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' Shortly afterwards the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'You must be one of them; your accent gives you away!' At this he started to curse and declared with an oath: 'I do not know the man.' At that moment a cock crowed; and Peter remembered how Jesus had said, 'Before the cock crows you will disown me three times,' and he went outside, and wept bitterly.

When morning came, the chief priests and the elders of the nation all met together to plan the death of Jesus. They bound him and led him away, to hand him over to Pilate, the Roman governor.

When Judas the traitor saw that Jesus had been condemned, he was seized with remorse, and returned the thirty silver pieces to the chief priests and elders. 'I have sinned,' he said; 'I have brought an innocent man to his death.' But they said, 'What is that to us? It is your concern.' So he threw the money down in the temple and left; he went away and hanged himself.

Acts 16: 16-34: Paul Prevents a Suicide

Once, on our way to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination and brought large profits to her owners by telling fortunes. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, and are declaring to you a way of salvation.' She did this day after day, until, in exasperation, Paul rounded on the spirit. 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her,' he said, and it came out instantly.

When the girl's owners saw that their hope of profit had gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the city authorities in the main square; bringing them before the magistrates, they alleged, 'These men are causing a disturbance in our city; they are Jews, and they are advocating practices which it is illegal for us Romans to adopt and follow.' The mob joined in the attack; and the magistrates had the prisoners stripped and gave orders for them to be flogged. After a severe beating they were flung into prison and the jailer was ordered to keep them under close guard. In view of these orders, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas, at their prayers, were singing praises to God, and the other prisoners were listening, when suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken; the doors burst open and all the prisoners found their fetters unfastened. The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open and, assuming that the prisoners had

escaped, drew his sword intending to kill himself. But Paul shouted, 'Do yourself no harm; we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and threw himself down before Paul and Silas, trembling with fear. He then escorted them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household,' and they imparted the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. At that late hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds, and there and then he and his whole family were baptized. He brought them up into his house, set out a meal, and rejoiced with his whole household in his new-found faith in God.

I Corinthians 3: 9-17: The Body as Temple

Or again, you are God's building. God gave me the privilege of laying the foundation like a skilled master builder; others put up the building. Let each take care how he builds. There can be no other foundation than the one already laid: I mean Jesus Christ himself. If anyone builds on that foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, or with wood, hay, and straw, the work that each does will at last be brought to light; the day of judgement will expose it. For that day dawns in fire, and the fire will test the worth of each person's work. If anyone's building survives, he will be rewarded; if it burns down, he will have to bear the loss; yet he will escape with his life, though only by passing through the fire. Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells. Anyone who destroys God's temple will himself be destroyed by God, because the temple of God is holy; and you are that temple.

Philippians 1: 12-26: Paul in Prison: On the Desire to Die

My friends, I want you to understand that the progress of the gospel has actually been helped by what has happened to me. It has become common knowledge throughout the imperial guard, and indeed among the public at large, that my imprisonment is in Christ's cause; and my being in prison has given most of our fellow-Christians confidence to speak the word of God fearlessly and with extraordinary courage.

Some, it is true, proclaim Christ in a jealous and quarrelsome spirit, but some do it in good-will. These are moved by love, knowing that it is to defend the gospel that I am where I am; the others are moved by selfish ambition and present Christ from mixed motives, meaning to cause me distress as I lie in prison. What does it matter? One way or another, whether sincerely or not, Christ is proclaimed; and for that I rejoice.

Yes, and I shall go on rejoicing; for I know well that the issue will be my deliverance, because you are praying for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is given me for support. It is my confident hope that nothing will daunt me or prevent me from speaking boldly; and that now as always Christ will display his greatness in me, whether the verdict be life or death. For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I am to go on living in the body there is fruitful work for me to do. Which then am I to choose? I cannot tell. I am pulled two ways: my own desire is to depart and be with Christ—that is better by far; but for your sake the greater need is for me to remain in the body. This convinces me: I am sure I shall remain, and stand by you all to ensure your progress and joy in the faith, so that on my account you may have even more cause for pride in Christ Jesus—through seeing me restored to you.

LOTUS SUTRA (c. 50–c. 200)

from *Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King* (expanded in Archive)

The Lotus Sutra, *or* Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, *is one of the earliest Mahayana Buddhist texts and is considered to be the principal Mahayana sutra. Developing somewhat after Hinayana, the more ancient form of Buddhism that later evolved into modern Theravada, Mahayana is the second, though larger, of the two main branches of Buddhist thought. Mahayana Buddhism developed in India between the 2nd century* B.C. *and the 1st century* A.D., *and by the 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries* A.D. *had begun to spread into China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Vietnam, and Central Asia, where further schools such as Pure Land Buddhism and Zen appeared. Mahayana Buddhism is more liberal in its interpretations of the teachings of the historical Buddha than Theravada, with a more mythologized interpretation of the nature of the Buddha; it also incorporates a wider variety of practices. Its monastic communities, or* sangha, *can include both lay believers and monks, both of whom can seek to become* bodhisattva, *aspirants to* bodhi *who seek to reach or enlightenment, who will also help all beings achieve nirvana. Although Buddhism remains widespread in much of Asia, by the 13th century* A.D., *it had largely disappeared from India.*

Little is known about the origin of the Lotus Sutra, *also called the* Lotus of the True Law, *although most scholars place its composition sometime in the 1st century* A.D., *with its final form being reached around 200* A.D. *The earliest translation of the* Lotus Sutra *into Chinese was made by Dharmaraksha in 286* A.D., *and it has become the most popular Buddhist text in China and Japan. It is the sole canonical text for Japanese Buddhists of the Nichiren sect.*

In its fairly simple, accessible literary style, illustrated with parables and poetic images, the Lotus Sutra *propounds all the major doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism and focuses on the doctrine of the "one true vehicle [or way]," Ekayana, which includes both the "greater vehicle," Mahayana, and the "lesser vehicle," Theravada. In a parable, the Buddha explains the nature of revelation and the way in which it is adapted to the limited faculties of not-yet-enlightened human beings, until they are ready for full revelation.*

The dramatic narrative of the Lotus Sutra *contains a succession of dialogues that serve to make an impression on the reader of the great wisdom, power, and eminence of the Buddha. The selection presented here centers on a discourse given by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who lived from* c. 563–483 B.C., *to a congregation of followers at a famed place called Vulture's Peak. He is represented as an almost eternal being, omnipotent, nearly free from the cycle of birth and rebirth, though from time to time, he descends to earth and is reborn among humans, as is the case in the discourse at Vulture's Peak. The discourse stresses the proper use of wisdom, the need for compassion, and the importance of moral living.*

The section of the text presented here is a Buddhist version of the myth of the phoenix. In it, a monk, the bodhisattva Mahasattva Sarvasattvapriyadarshana, or the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, feeds himself for 12 years on the substances usually used in sacrificial rituals and then, by self-immolation, sacrifices his perfumed and anointed body to the Buddha. The Bodhisattva's body burns for 1,200 years before he is reborn, having achieved a "heroic feat." This is one step on his way to final extinction, having achieved Nirvana.

Source

Lotus Sutra, ch. 23, "Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King," tr. Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 280–289. Footnotes interpolated.

from THE LOTUS SUTRA

Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King

"At that time, for the sake of the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings and the other numerous bodhisattvas and multitude of voice-hearers, the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra. This bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings delighted in carrying out arduous practices. In the midst of the Law preached by the buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue he applied himself diligently and traveled about here and there, single-mindedly seeking Buddhahood for a period of fully twelve thousand years. After that he was able to gain the Samadhi in which one can manifest all physical forms. Having gained this Samadhi, his heart was filled with great joy and he thought to himself: My gaining the Samadhi in which I can manifest all physical forms is due entirely to the fact that I heard the Lotus Sutra. I must now make an offering to the buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue and to the Lotus Sutra!

"Immediately he entered the Samadhi and in the midst of the sky rained down mandarava flowers, great mandarava flowers, and finely ground, hard black particles of sandalwood; they filled the whole sky like clouds as they came raining down. . . . All these he used as an offering to the Buddha.

"When he had finished making this offering, he rose from his Samadhi and thought to himself: Though I have employed my supernatural powers to make this offering to the Buddha, it is not as good as making an offering of my own body.

"Thereupon he swallowed various perfumes, sandalwood, kunduruka, turushka, prikka, aloes, and liquidambar gum, and he also drank the fragrant oil of champaka and other kinds of flowers, doing this for a period of fully twelve hundred years. Anointing his body with fragrant oil, he appeared before the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, wrapped his body in heavenly jeweled robes, poured fragrant oil over his head and, calling on his transcendental powers, set fire to his body. The glow shone forth, illuminating worlds equal in number to the sands of eighty million Ganges. The Buddhas in these worlds simultaneously spoke out in praise, saying: 'Excellent, excellent, good man! This is true diligence. This is what is called a true Dharma offering to the Thus Come One. . . . Though one may make donations of his realm and cities, his wife and children, he is no match for this! Good man, this is called the foremost donation of all. Among all donations, this is the most highly prized, for one is offering the Dharma to the Thus Come ones!'

"After they had spoken these words, they each one fell silent. The body of the bodhisattva burned for twelve hundred years, and when that period of time had passed, it at last burned itself out.

"After the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings had made this Dharma offering and his life had come to an end, he was reborn in the land of the buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, in the household of the king Pure Virtue. Sitting in cross-legged position, he was suddenly born by transformation, and at once for the benefit of his father he spoke in verse form, saying:

Great king, you should now understand this.
Having walked about in a certain place,
I immediately gained the Samadhi
that allows me to manifest all physical forms.
I have carried out my endeavors with great diligence
and cast aside the body that I loved.

"When he had recited this verse, he said to his father: 'The buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue is still present at this time. Previously I made an offering to this buddha and gained a dharani that allows me to understand the words of all living beings. Moreover I have heard this Lotus Sutra with its eight hundred, thousand, ten thousand, millions of [extremely large numerical units], nayutas, kankaras, vivaras, akshobhyas of verses. Great king, I must now once more make an offering to this buddha.' . . .

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"At that time the buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue said to the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings: 'Good man, the time has come for my nirvana. The time has come for extinction. You may provide me with a comfortable couch, for tonight will be my parinirvana.'

"He also commanded the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, saying: 'Good man, I take this Law of the Buddha and entrust it to you. In addition, the bodhisattvas and great disciples, along with the Law of anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, and the thousand-millionfold seven-jeweled world, with its jeweled trees and jeweled daises and heavenly beings who wait on and attend them—all these I hand over to you. I also entrust to you the relics of my body that remain after I have passed into extinction. You must distribute them abroad and arrange for offerings to them far and wide. You should erect many thousands of towers [to house them].'

"The buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, having given these commands to the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, that night, in the last watch of the night, entered nirvana.

"At that time the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, seeing the buddha pass into extinction, was deeply grieved and distressed. Out of his great love and longing for the buddha he at once prepared a pyre made of sandalwood from the seashore, and with this as an offering to the buddha's body, he cremated the body. . . .

"At that time the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings once more thought to himself: Though I have made these offerings, my mind is not yet satisfied. I must make some further offering to the relics.

"Then he spoke to the other bodhisattvas and great disciples, and to the heavenly beings, dragons, yakshas, and all the members of the great assembly, saying, 'You must give your

undivided attention. I will now make an offering to the relics of the buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue.'

"Having spoken these words, immediately in the presence of the eighty-four thousand towers he burned his arms, which were adorned with a hundred blessings, for a period of seventy-two thousand years as his offering. This caused the numberless multitudes who were seeking to become voice-hearers, along with an immeasurable asamkhya of persons, to conceive a desire for anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, and all of them were able to dwell in the Samadhi where one can manifest all physical forms.

"At that time the bodhisattvas, heavenly and human beings, asuras and others, seeing that the bodhisattva had destroyed his arms, were alarmed and saddened and they said: 'This bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living beings is our teacher, instructing and converting us. Now he has burned his arms and his body is no longer whole!'

"At that time, in the midst of the great assembly, the bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings made this vow, saying: 'I have cast away both my arms. I am certain to attain the golden body of a buddha. If this is true and not false, then may my two arms become as they were before!'

"When he had finished pronouncing this vow, his arms reappeared of themselves as they had been before. This came about because the merits and wisdom of this bodhisattva were manifold and profound. At that time the thousand-millionfold world shook and trembled in six different ways, heaven rained down jeweled flowers, and all the heavenly and human beings gained what they had never had before."

The buddha said to the bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "What do you think? Is this bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings someone unknown to you? He is in fact none other than the present bodhisattva Medicine King! He cast aside his body as an offering in this fashion immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of times.

"Constellation King Flower, if there are those who have made up their minds and wish to gain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, they would do well to burn a finger or one toe of their foot as an offering to the Buddha towers. It is better than offering one's realm and cities, wife and children, or the mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes in the lands of the thousand-millionfold world, of all their precious treasures. Even if a person were to fill the whole thousand-million world with the seven treasures as an offering to the Buddha and the great bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas and arhats, the benefits gained by such a person cannot match those gained by accepting and upholding this Lotus Sutra, even just one four-line verse of it! The latter brings the most numerous blessings of all.

"Constellation King Flower, among all the rivers, streams, and other bodies of water, for example, the ocean is foremost. And this Lotus Sutra is likewise, being the most profound and greatest of the sutras preached by the Thus Come Ones. . . . Among all the stars and their like, the moon, a god's son, is foremost, so this Lotus Sutra is likewise. For among all the thousands, ten thousands, millions of types of sutra teachings, it shines the brightest. And just as the sun, a god's son, can banish all darkness, so too this sutra is capable of destroying the darkness of all that is not good.

. . .

"A person who can accept and uphold this sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings. Bodhisattvas are foremost among all voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas, and in the same way

this sutra is foremost among all the sutra teachings. As the Buddha is king of the doctrines, so likewise this sutra is king of the sutras.

"Constellation King Flower, this sutra can save all living beings. This sutra can cause all living beings to free themselves from suffering and anguish. This sutra can bring great benefits to all living beings and fulfill their desires, as a clear cool pond can satisfy all those who are thirsty. It is like a fire to one who is cold, a robe to one who is naked, like a band of merchants finding a leader, a child finding its mother, someone finding a ship in which to cross the water, a sick man finding a doctor, someone in darkness finding a lamp, the poor finding riches, the people finding a ruler, a traveling merchant finding his way to the sea. It is like a torch that banishes darkness. Such is this Lotus Sutra. It can cause living beings to cast off all distress, all sickness and pain. It can unloose all the bonds of birth and death.

"If a person is able to hear this Lotus Sutra, if he copies it himself or causes others to copy it, the benefits he gains thereby will be such that even the Buddha wisdom could never finish calculating their extent. . . .

"Constellation King Flower, if there is a person who hears this chapter on the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, he too will gain immeasurable and boundless benefits. If there is a woman who hears this chapter on the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King and is able to accept and uphold it, that will be her last appearance in a woman's body and she will never be born in that form again.

"If in the last five hundred year period after the Thus Come One has entered extinction there is a woman who hears this sutra and carries out its practices as the sutra directs, when her life here on earth comes to an end she will immediately go to the world of Peace and Delight where the buddha Amitayus dwells surrounded by the assembly of great bodhisattvas and there will be born [in male form] seated on a jeweled seat in the center of a lotus blossom. He will no longer know the torments of greed, desire, anger, rage, stupidity of ignorance, or the torments brought about by arrogance, envy or other defilements. He will gain the bodhisattva's transcendental powers and the truth of the birthlessness of all phenomena. Having gained this truth, his faculty of sight will be clear and pure, and with this clear pure faculty of sight he will see Buddhas and Thus Come Ones equal in number to the sands of seven hundred twelve thousand million nayutas of Ganges.

. . .

"For this reason, Constellation King Flower, I entrust this chapter on the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King to you. After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa and never allow it to be cut off, nor must you allow evil devils, the devils' people, heavenly beings, dragons, yakshas of kumbhanda demons to seize the advantage!

"Constellation King Flower, you must use your transcendental powers to guard and protect this sutra. Why? Because this sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvipa. If a person who has an illness is able to hear this sutra, then his illness will be wiped out and he will know neither old age or death.

. . . "For this reason when those who seek the Buddha way see someone who accepts and upholds this sutra, they should approach him with this kind of respect and reverence."

When [the Buddha] preached this chapter on the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, eighty-four thousand bodhisattvas gained the dharani that allows them to understand the words of all living beings.

TACITUS
(c. 55–c. 117)

from *The Annals: The Death of Seneca*

Cornelius Tacitus, born in northern Italy or southern Gaul, was a Roman political leader and historian who chronicled Roman history of the 1st century A.D. *He was educated in rhetoric in Rome for a career in law and apparently served in several positions of leadership, including quaestor, praetor, and consul. In the year 112 or 113, he held the position of proconsul, or local governor, in the Roman province of Asia. Tacitus spent the last years of his life working on his histories.*

Tacitus wrote two major historical works, the Histories *(104–109), arranged into 14 books, and the* Annals *(c. 115–117), comprised of 16 books. These compositions, of which fewer than half survive today, together provide a history of Rome from the years 14 to 96* A.D.

In the fifteenth book of the Annals, *Tacitus relates the suicide of the Stoic statesman Seneca the Younger [q.v.], whose writings on suicide are also included in this volume. According to this account, Seneca was implicated in a conspiracy instigated by the plebeian Piso against the emperor Nero. Earlier in his life, Seneca had been Nero's tutor, and later, together with Burrus, became a trusted advisor to Nero. It is said that much of the decency and moderation of the first five years of Nero's rule may be attributed to the guidance of Seneca and Burrus. However, Nero grew envious of Seneca's fortune and attempted to have him poisoned. After the attempt failed, Nero accused Seneca of involvement in the conspiracy and gave the imperial order that Seneca commit suicide. In Tacitus' account, Seneca voluntarily complied with the order. He also consented to his wife Paulina's determination to die with him, and they opened their veins together. After a prolonged period of suffering, poison was administered and eventually caused Seneca to die; Paulina's attempt at suicide was prevented at Nero's command once she herself was already unconscious.*

Tacitus' account conveys Seneca's expectation that his suicide, despite the fact that it was unjustly ordered by Nero, will be viewed as an act of courage, to be rewarded with fame and glory, though less so than Paulina's suicide. He says to her: "we will leave behind us an example of equal constancy; but the glory will be all your own." Seneca's death is often regarded as a model of Stoic suicide.

Source

Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XV, 60–64, ed. E. H. Blakeney, tr. Arthur Murray, New York: E. P. Dutton; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1908, Vol. 1, pp. 498–502.

from THE ANNALS: THE DEATH OF SENECA

The next exploit of Nero was the death of Seneca. Against that eminent man no proof of guilt appeared; but the emperor thirsted for his blood, and what poison had not accomplished, he was determined to finish by the sword. Natalis was the only person who had mentioned his name. The chief head of his accusation was, "That he himself had been sent on a visit to Seneca, then confined by illness, with instructions to mention to him, that Piso often called at his house, but never could gain admittance, though it was the interest of both to live on terms of mutual friendship." To this Seneca made answer, "That private interviews could be of no service to either; but still his happiness was grafted on the safety of Piso." Granius Silvanus, a tribune of the prætorian guards, was dispatched to Seneca, with directions to let him know what was alleged against him, and to inquire whether he admitted the conversation stated by Natalis, with the answers given by himself. Seneca, by design or accident, was that very day on his return from Campania. He stopped at a villa of his own about four miles from Rome. Towards the close of day the tribune arrived, and beset the house with a band of soldiers. Seneca was at supper with his wife Pompeia Paulina, and two of his friends, when Silvanus entered the room, and reported the orders of the emperor.

Seneca did not hesitate to acknowledge that Natalis had been at his house, with a complaint that Piso's visits were not received. His apology, he said, imported no more than want of health, the love of ease, and the necessity of attending to a weak and crazy constitution. "That he should prefer the interest of a private citizen to his own safety was too absurd to be believed. He had no motives to induce him to pay such a compliment to any man; adulation was no part of his character. This is a truth well known to Nero himself: he can tell you that, on various occasions, he found in Seneca a man, who spoke his mind with freedom, and disdained the arts of servile flattery." Silvanus returned to Rome. He found the prince in company with Poppæa and Tigellinus, who, as often as cruelty was in agitation, formed the cabinet council. In their presence the messenger reported his answer. Nero asked, "Does Seneca prepare to end his days by a voluntary death?" "He showed," said the tribune, "no symptom of fear, no token of sorrow, no dejected passion: his words and looks bespoke a mind serene, erect, and firm." "Return," said Nero, "and tell him he must resolve to die." Silvanus, according to the account of Fabius Rusticus, chose to go back by a different road. He went through a private way to Fenius Rufus, to advise with that officer, whether he should execute the emperor's orders. Rufus told him that he must obey. Such was the degenerate spirit of the times. A general panic took possession of every mind. This very Silvanus was one of the conspirators, and yet was base enough to be an instrument of the cruelty which he had combined to revenge. He had, however, the decency to avoid the shock of seeing Seneca, and of delivering in person the fatal message. He sent a centurion to perform that office for him.

Seneca heard the message with calm composure. He called for his will, and being deprived of that right of a Roman citizen by the centurion, he turned to his friends. And "You see," he said, "that I am not at liberty to requite your services with the last marks of my esteem. One thing,

however, still remains. I leave you the example of my life, the best and most precious legacy now in my power. Cherish it in your memory, and you will gain at once the applause due to virtue, and the fame of a sincere and generous friendship." All who were present melted into tears. He endeavored to assuage their sorrows; he offered his advice with mild persuasion; he used the tone of authority. "Where," he said, "are the precepts of philosophy, and where the words of wisdom, which for years have taught us to meet the calamities of life with firmness and a well prepared spirit? Was the cruelty of Nero unknown to any of us? He murdered his mother; he destroyed his brother; and, after those deeds of horror, what remains to fill the measure of his guilt but the death of his guardian and his tutor?"

Having delivered himself in these pathetic terms, he directed his attention to his wife. He clasped her in his arms, and in that fond embrace yielded for a while to the tenderness of his nature. Recovering his resolution, he entreated her to appease her grief, and bear in mind that his life was spent in a constant course of honour and of virtue. That consideration would serve to heal affliction, and sweeten all her sorrows. Paulina was still inconsolable. She was determined to die with her husband; she invoked the aid of the executioners, and begged to end her wretched being. Seneca saw that she was animated by the love of glory, and that generous principle he thought ought not to be restrained. The idea of leaving a beloved object exposed to the insults of the world, and the malice of her enemies, pierced him to the quick. "It has been my care," he said, "to instruct you in that best philosophy, the art of mitigating the ills of life; but you prefer an honourable death. I will not envy you the vast renown that must attend your fall. Since you will have it so, we will die together. We will leave behind us an example of equal constancy; but the glory will be all your own."

These words were no sooner uttered, than the veins of both their arms were opened. At Seneca's time of life the blood was slow and languid. The decay of nature, and the impoverishing diet to which he had used himself, left him in a feeble condition. He ordered the vessels of his legs and joints to be punctured. After that operation, he began to labour with excruciating pains. Lest his sufferings should overpower the constancy of his wife, or the sight of her afflictions prove too much for his own sensibility, he persuaded her to retire into another room. His eloquence still continued to flow with its usual purity. He called for his secretaries, and dictated, while life was ebbing away, that farewell discourse, which has been published, and is in everybody's hands. I will not injure his last words by giving the substance in another form.

Nero had conceived no antipathy to Paulina. If she perished with her husband, he began to dread the public execration. That he might not multiply the horrors of his present cruelty, he sent orders to exempt Paulina from the stroke of death. The slaves and freedmen, by the direction of the soldiers, bound up her arm, and stopped the effusion of blood. This, it is said, was done without her knowledge, as she lay in a state of languor. The fact, however, cannot be known with certainty. Vulgar malignity, which is ever ready to detract from exalted virtue, spread a report, that, as long as she had reason to think that the rage of Nero was implacable, she had the ambition to share the glory of her husband's fate; but a milder prospect being unexpectedly presented, the charms of life gained admission to her heart, and triumphed over her constancy. She lived a few years longer, in fond regret, to the end of her days, revering the memory of her husband. The weakness of her whole frame, and the sickly languor of her countenance, plainly showed that she had been reduced to the last extremity.

Seneca lingered in pain. The approach of death was slow, and he wished for his dissolution. Fatigued with pain, worn out and exhausted, he requested his friend, Statius Annaeus, whose fidelity and medical skill he had often experienced, to administer a draught of that swift-speeding poison, usually given at Athens to the criminals adjudged to death. He swallowed the potion, but without any immediate effect. His limbs were chilled: the vessels of his body were closed, and the ingredients, though keen and subtle, could not arrest the principles of life. He desired to be placed in a warm bath. Being conveyed according to his desire, he sprinkled his slaves with the water, and "Thus," he said, "I make libation to Jupiter the deliverer." The vapour soon overpowered him, and he was committed to the flames. He had given directions for that purpose in his last will, made at a time when he was in the zenith of power, and even then looked forward to the close of his days.

EPICTETUS (c. 55–c. 135)

from *Discourses:*

How From the Doctrine of Our Relationship to God We Are to Deduce Its Consequences

How We Should Bear Illness (in Archive only)

Of Freedom

Born in Hierapolis, Phrygia (modern Turkey) to a slave woman, Epictetus was himself a slave during his childhood and adolescence. He was lame, according to Origen's account, from injuries caused by his master Epaphroditus's twisting his leg until he broke it, although others accounts describe Epaphroditus as a good master. Epaphroditus, himself a freedman of Nero, sent Epictetus to study with the most influential Stoic teacher and theoretician of the time, Gaius Musonius Rufus, and Epictetus was freed by his master, or on the death of his master, sometime after Nero's death in 68. Epictetus traveled to Rome and began instructing students in Stoicism. In the year 90, he was expelled, along with other Stoic philosophers, by the Roman emperor Domitian, and then moved to Epirus, where he led a large, thriving school of Stoic physics, logic, and ethics. He did not marry, but in his old age, with the help of a nurse, he took in an orphaned child who would otherwise have been exposed. Epictetus' teachings were collected in two volumes by his pupil Lucius Flavius Arrian: the Discourses, *written about 108, of which four of eight books survive, and the* Encheiridion *(also called the* Manual *or* Handbook), *made up of fragments from the* Discourses. *Arrian explains their informal expression by saying he did not intend to write a book, but to keep notes of what he used to hear Epictetus say "word for word in the very language he used, as far as possible, to capture the directness of his speech."*

Epictetus espoused the Stoic view of the ideal condition for a human being—to be aware of, yet immune to, the bruisings of fortune—to lack all dissatisfaction with anything about the world, to be disappointed by nothing, and to achieve an impersonal point of view. Yet Epictetus also held that if you can help people adjust their desires and attitudes to more realistic levels, you can help them improve their lives. To live in accordance with virtue is to live in accordance with nature, but in giving practical advice, Epictetus clearly realized that lowered expectations were less likely to be disappointed.

A number of Stoic thinkers, especially Seneca, celebrated suicide as the act of the wise man: it was the guarantee of freedom. Epictetus stressed a component of the Stoic view that suicide ought not to be undertaken too quickly to avoid suffering, since people can live best by accepting their powerlessness over circumstances through their capacity for control of the will and by refusing to allow the vicissitudes of life, even illness, to affect them. One need not in general kill oneself to avoid the sufferings of life, and to do so without good reason would be inappropriate. Epictetus used the Platonic (and originally Pythagorean) argument that traded on the metaphor of the person as guard or sentinel, stationed by God at a post, to discourage suicide in response to painful circumstances: "Friends, wait for God, till he give the signal and dismiss you from this service; then depart to him. For the present, endure to remain at this post where he has placed you." Strategies like analysis, delay, detachment, and so on may minimize fortune's blows. Yet suicide is the most drastic method of escaping pain, and it can certainly be used when all else has failed: The door, to use the frequent Stoic metaphor, is always open.

Source

Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book 1, ch. 9; Book III, ch. 10; Book IV, ch. 1, tr. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1865), Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1944, pp. 27–28, 198–199, 281–282.

from DISCOURSES

How From the Doctrine of Our Relationship to God We Are to Deduce its Consequences

I think that your old teacher ought not to have to be working to keep you from thinking or speaking too meanly or ignobly of yourselves, but should rather be working to keep young men of spirit who, knowing their affinity to the gods and how we are, as it were, fettered by the body and its possessions, and by the many other things that thus are needful for the daily pursuits of life, from resolving to throw them all off, as troublesome and vexatious and useless, and depart to their divine kindred.

This is the work that ought to employ your master and teacher, if you had one. You would come to him and say: "Epictetus, we can no longer bear being tied down to this poor body—feeding, and resting, and cleaning it, and vexed with so many low cares on its account. Are not these things indifferent and nothing to us and death no evil? Are we not kindred to God; and did we not come from him? Suffer us to go back whence we came. Suffer us to be

released at last from these fetters that bind and weigh us down. Here thieves and robbers, courts and tyrants, claim power over us, through the body and its possessions. Suffer us to show them that they have no power."

In which case it would be my part to answer: "Friends, wait for God, till he give the signal and dismiss you from this service; then depart to him. For the present, endure to remain at this post where he has placed you. The time of your abode here is short and easy for men like you; for what tyrant, what thief, or what court can be formidable to those who count as nothing the body and its possessions? Wait, do not foolishly depart."

Of Freedom

[Socrates] did not even deliberate about it; though he knew that, perhaps, he might die for it. But what did that signify to him? For it was something else that he wanted to preserve, not his mere flesh; but his fidelity, his honor, free from attack or subjection. And afterwards, when he was to make a defense for his life, does he behave like one having children, or a wife? No, but like a man alone in the world. And how does he behave, when required to drink the poison? When he might escape, and Crito would have him escape from prison for the sake of his children, what did he say? Does he think it a fortune opportunity? How should he? But he considers what is becoming, and neither sees nor regards anything else. "For I am not desirous," he says, "to preserve this pitiful body; but that part which is improved and preserved by justice, and impaired and destroyed by injustice." Socrates is not to be basely preserved. He who refused to vote for what the Athenians commanded; he who despised the thirty tyrants; he who held such discourses on virtue and mortal beauty—such a man is not to be preserved by a base action, but is preserved by dying, instead of running away. For a good actor is saved when he stops when he should stop, rather than acting beyond his time.

"What then will become of your children?" "If I had gone away into Thessaly, you would have taken care of them; and will there be no one to take care of them when I am departed to Hades?" You see how he ridicules and plays with death. But if it had been you or I, we should presently have proved by philosophical arguments that those who act unjustly are to be repaid in their own way; and should have added, "If I escape I shall be of use to many; if I die, to none." Nay, if it had been necessary, we should have crept through a mouse hole to get away. But how should *we* have been of use to anybody? Where could we be of use? If we were useful alive, should we not be of still more use to mankind by dying when we ought and as we ought? And now the remembrance of the death of Socrates is not less, but even more useful to the world than that of the things which he did and said when alive.

Study these points, these principles, these discourses; contemplate these examples if you would be free, if you desire the thing in proportion to its value. And where is the wonder that you should purchase so good a thing at the price of other things, be they never so many and so great? Some hang themselves, others break their necks, and sometimes even whole cities have been destroyed for that which is reputed freedom; and will not you for the sake of the true and secure and inviolable freedom, repay God what he has given when he demands it? Will you study not

only, as Plato says, how to die, but how to be tortured and banished and scourged; and, in short, how to give up all that belongs to others?

If not, you will be a slave among slaves, though you were ten thousand times a consul; and even though you should rise to the palace, you will be a slave none the less.

PLINY THE YOUNGER (62–113)

from *Letters:*

To Calestrius Tiro
To Catilius Severus (expanded in Archive)
To Marcilius Nepos (in Archive only)
To Calpurnius Macer (in Archive only)

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, known as Pliny the Younger to differentiate him from his uncle Gaius Plinius Secundus, Pliny the Elder (23–79) [q.v.], had a successful career in the Roman Senate. He was a consul and governor of Bithynia and Pontica in the years just before his death; his comments on the treatment of Christians in these provinces are among the earliest historical references to Christianity. Pliny's work is preserved in 10 volumes of letters (some 368 in all) that constitute an important source of first-hand documentation and social commentary concerning life in the Roman Empire at the turn of the 1st century.

Pliny's Letters *include accounts of deliberations about suicide by two friends, one, Corellius Rufus, who killed himself to avoid further suffering from incurable illness, and another, Titius Aristo, who decided not to do so if there were any chance of recovery. In both cases, the prospect of suicide is made known to or discussed with family members, friends, and a physician. There is the famous Arria, who consulted with no one at all, as well as the less famous woman of Lake Como who forces her husband into suicide to avoid a lethal condition by tying herself to him and jumping into the lake. Pliny's particular interest is in the role of reason in such deliberations about suicide. Nevertheless, for Pliny, understanding a suicide or contemplated suicide does not diminish his grief or anxiety over it.*

Sources

The Letters of the Younger Pliny, With An Introductory Essay by John B. Firth. New York and Felling-on-Tyne: Walter Scott Ltd., 1900. Book I, Letter XII, "To Calestrius Tiro"; Book I, Letter XXII, "To Catilius Severus"; Book III, Letter 16, "To Marcilius Nepos," following the Teubner text, ed. Keil, available at Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org, text #3234. "To Calpurnius Macer," Book VI, Letter 24. *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus*, tr. Betty Radice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969, p. 455. Online at www.gutenberg.org.

from LETTERS

To Calestrius Tiro

I have suffered a most grievous loss, if loss is a word that can be applied to my being bereft of so distinguished a man. Corellius Rufus is dead, and what makes my grief the more poignant is that he died by his own act. Such a death is always most lamentable, since neither natural causes nor Fate can be held responsible for it. When people die of disease there is a great consolation in the thought that no one could have prevented it; when they lay violent hands on themselves we feel a pang which nothing can assuage in the thought that they might have lived longer. Corellius, it is true, felt driven to take his own life by Reason—and Reason is always tantamount to Necessity with philosophers—and yet there were abundant inducements for him to live. His conscience was stainless, his reputation beyond reproach; he stood high in men's esteem. Moreover, he had a daughter, a wife, a grandson, and sisters, and, besides all these relations, many genuine friends. But his battle against ill-health had been so long and hopeless that all these splendid rewards of living were outweighed by the reasons that urged him to die.

I have heard him say that he was first attacked by gout in the feet when he was thirty-three years of age. He had inherited the complaint, for it often happens that a tendency to disease is handed down like other qualities in a sort of succession. While he was in the prime of life he overcame his malady and kept it well in check by abstemious and pure living, and when it became sharper in its attacks as he grew old he bore up against it with great fortitude of mind. Even when he suffered incredible torture and the most horrible agony—for the pain was no longer confined, as before, to the feet, but had begun to spread over all his limbs—I went to see him in the time of Domitian when he was staying at his country house. His attendants withdrew from his chamber, as they always did whenever one of his more intimate friends entered the room. Even his wife, a lady who might have been trusted to keep any secret, also used to retire. Looking round the room, he said: "Why do you think I endure pain like this so long? It is that I may outlive that tyrant, even if only by a single day." Could you but have given him a frame fit to support his resolution, he would have achieved the object of his desire. However, some god heard his prayer and granted it, and then feeling that he could die without anxiety and as a free man ought, he snapped the bonds that bound him to life. Though they were many, he preferred death.

His malady had become worse, though he tried to moderate it by his careful diet, and then, as it still continued to grow, he escaped from it by a fixed resolve. Two, three, four days passed and he refused all food. Then his wife Hispulla sent our mutual friend Caius Geminius to tell me the sad news that Corellius had determined to die, that he was not moved by the entreaties of his wife and daughter, and that I was the only one left who might possibly recall him to life. I flew to see him, and had almost reached the house when Hispulla sent me another message by Julius Atticus, saying that now even I could do nothing, for his resolve had become more and more fixed. When the doctor offered him nourishment he said, "My mind is made up," and the word has awakened within me not only a sense of loss, but of admiration. I keep thinking what a friend, what a manly friend is now lost to me. He was at the end of his seventy-sixth year, an

age long enough even for the stoutest of us. True. He has escaped a lifelong illness; he has died leaving children to survive him, and knowing that the State, which was dearer to him than everything else beside, was prospering well. Yes, yes, I know all this. And yet I grieve at his death as I should at the death of a young man in the full vigour of life; I grieve—you may think me weak for so doing—on my own account too. For I have lost, lost for ever, the guide, philosopher, and friend of my life. In short, I will say again what I said to my friend Calvisius, when my grief was fresh: "I am afraid I shall not live so well ordered a life now." Send me a word of sympathy, but do not say, "He was an old man, or he was infirm." These are hackneyed words; send me some that are new, that are potent to ease my trouble, that I cannot find in books or hear from my friends. For all that I have heard and read occur to me naturally, but they are powerless in the presence of my excessive sorrow. Farewell.

To Catilius Severus

Here am I still in Rome, and a good deal surprised to find myself here. But I am troubled at the long illness of Titus Aristo, which he cannot shake off. He is a man for whom I feel an extraordinary admiration and affection: search where you will, he is second to none in character, uprightness, and learning—so much so that I hardly look upon his illness as that of a mere individual being in danger. It is rather as if literature and all good arts were personified in him, and through him were in grievous peril. What a knowledge he has of private and public rights and the laws relating to them! What a mastery he has of things in general, what experience, what an acquaintance with the past! There is nothing you may wish to learn that he cannot teach you; to me, certainly, he is a perfect mine of learning whenever I am requiring any out-of-the-way information. Then again, how convincing his conversation is, how strongly it impresses you, how modest and becoming is his hesitation! What is there that he does not know straight away? And yet, often enough, he shows hesitation and doubt, from the very diversity of the reasons that come crowding into his mind, and upon these he brings to bear his keen and mighty intellect, and, going back to their fountain-head, reviews them, tests them, and weighs them in the balance. . . . Yet in chastity of life, in piety, in justice, in courage even, there is no one of all his acquaintance to whom he need give place.

You would marvel, if you were by his side, at the patience with which he endures his illness, how he fights against his suffering, how he resists his thirst, how, without moving and without throwing off his bed-clothes, he endures the dreadful burning heats of his fever. Just recently he sent for me and a few others of his especial friends with me, and begged us to consult his doctors and ask them about the termination of his illness, so that if there were no hope for him he might voluntarily give up his life, but might fight against it and hold out if the illness only threatened to be difficult and long. He owed it, he said, to the prayers of his wife, the tears of his daughter, and the regard of us who were his friends, not to cheat our hopes by a voluntary death, providing those hopes were not altogether futile. I think that such an acknowledgment as that must be especially difficult to make, and worthy of the highest praise; for many people are quite capable of hastening to death under the impulse of a sudden instinct, but only a truly noble mind can weigh up the pros and cons of the matter, and resolve to live or die according to the dictates of Reason. However, the doctors give us reassuring promises, and it now remains for the Deity to confirm and fulfil them, and so at length release me from my anxiety. . . .

JUSTIN MARTYR (c. 100–165)

from *The Second Apology: Why Christians Do Not Kill Themselves*

Saint Justin (the) Martyr, theologian and philosopher, was one of the first Christian apologists, sainted and numbered among the Fathers of the Church. He was born in the city of Flavia Neapolis (now Nabulus, West Bank), a Roman city built on the site of the ancient Shechem, in Samaria. His parents practiced the Roman religion. Justin studied Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato and the Stoics, before converting to Christianity; he also knew Judaism and Greco-Roman religion well. After his conversion to Christianity, he traveled about on foot defending its truths, often entering into violent controversies, and later opened a Christian school in Rome. He developed the conception of a divine plan in history and laid the foundation for a theology of history drawing from both philosophy and Christian revelation.

In Rome, Justin wrote the Dialogue with Trypho, *emphasizing the continuity of the Old and the New Testaments, and two* Apologies for the Christians, *collections of reasoned defenses against Roman allegations of Christian insurrection, directed to the emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Justin's work in general addressed a philosophically sophisticated Greek and Roman audience. After debating with the Cynic Crescens, however, Justin was denounced to the Roman prefect as subversive and condemned to death; he was scourged and martyred by beheading in Rome during the rule of Marcus Aurelius.*

In this very short selection from "The Second Apology," Justin provides an earnest answer to the sort of flippant remark that might be made by a non-Christian detractor, perhaps a Roman who is influenced by Stoicism and thus views suicide as a potentially rational and prudent act, and who mocks the Christian belief in a personal afterlife. If Christians believe in a personal afterlife in which one will be received into the presence of God, the detractor seems to imply, why do they suffer martyrdom rather than commit suicide? Why not kill oneself and go directly to God? Justin's brief answer alludes to the central Christian values of the educative, formative purpose of human life, the pursuit of moral good and the rejection of evil, and the importance of continuing the Christian faith (i.e., instruction in the divine doctrines), as well as preserving God's creation, the human race itself; his reasons display the basis of the Christian belief that suicide is wrong.

Source

Justin Martyr, "The Second Apology of Justin for the Christians Addressed to the Roman Senate," ch. 4. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, *Vol I: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1867.

from THE SECOND APOLOGY: WHY CHRISTIANS DO NOT KILL THEMSELVES

Lest any one should say to us, 'All of you, go, kill yourselves and thus go immediately to God, and save us the trouble,' I will explain why we do not do that, and why, when interrogated, we boldly acknowledge our faith. We have been taught that God did not create the world without a purpose, but that He did so for the sake of mankind; for we have stated before that God is pleased with those who imitate His perfections, but is displeased with those who choose evil, either in word or in deed. If, then, we should all kill ourselves we would be the cause, as far as it is up to us, why no one would be born and be instructed in the divine doctrines, or even why the human race might cease to exist; if we do act thus, we ourselves will be opposing the will of God.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 150–c. 215)

from *The Miscellanies* (*Stromata*)

The Praises of Martyrdom (expanded in Archive)
Those Who Offered Themselves for Martyrdom Reproved (in Archive only)

Titus Flavius Clemens, or St. Clement of Alexandria, was a Greek theologian of the early Christian church, the second known leader of the Alexandrian school of theology. He was born to a pagan family, allegedly in Athens, although his place of birth and the dates of his birth and death are uncertain. He studied under Pantaeus at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, the first Christian scholastic institution of its kind, known for promoting the allegorical method of biblical interpretation. Clement succeeded Pantaeus as its leader from about 190 until 203. Under the leadership of Pantaeus, Clement, and his pupil Origen, this school grew famous as a center of learning at the time.

Clement was the author of Exhortation to the Greeks, *the three books of* The Tutors, *and the eight books of the* Stromateis *or* Stromata, *usually translated as* Miscellanies, *from which the selections here are taken. Clement also wrote* Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved? *In 202 or 203, Clement left Alexandria as a new round of persecutions of Christians began.*

In the short selections here, Clement addresses what had become a troubling issue for the church, especially during periods of persecution. Christians were committed to belief in God and the divinity of Christ, and would prefer death to denying this faith. But some writers, notably Ignatius [q.v.] and Tertullian [q.v.], stressed the desirability of martyrdom and exhorted Christians to become martyrs.

Indeed, some Christians openly flaunted their faith as a way of courting or provoking their own martyrdom. Clement, in a view the church came to accept, opposes this excess; he honors the genuine martyr, the one who achieves perfection and performs "the perfect work of love" in voluntarily sacrificing his body, but excoriates those who have "rushed on death" or have "presented themselves for capture." In Clement's view, they are guilty in much the same way as the murderer and the self-killer, the suicide; while martyrdom is to be respected, the true Christian should do everything possible to avoid it, short of betraying one's faith.

Source

The Writings of Clement of Alexandria, Vol. II. *Miscellanies (Stromata)*, Book IV, chs. iv, x, tr. Rev. William Wilson. *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XII. Edinburgh: T &T Clark, 1869, pp. 145–148, 173–174.

from THE PRAISES OF MARTYRDOM

Whence, as is reasonable, the gnostic, when called, obeys easily, and gives up his body to him who asks; and, previously divesting himself of the affections of this carcase, not insulting the tempter, but rather, in my opinion, training him and convincing him,

> *"From what honour and what extent of wealth fallen,"*

as says Empedocles, here for the future he walks with mortals. He, in truth, bears witness to himself that he is faithful and loyal towards God; and to the tempter, that he in vain envied him who is faithful through love; and to the Lord, of the inspired persuasion in reference to His doctrine, from which he will not depart through fear of death; further, he confirms also the truth of preaching by his deed, showing that God to whom he hastes is powerful. You will wonder at his love, which he conspicuously shows with thankfulness, in being united to what is allied to him, and besides by his precious blood, shaming the unbelievers. He then avoids denying Christ through fear by reason of the command; nor does he sell his faith in the hope of the gifts prepared, but in love to the Lord he will most gladly depart from this life; perhaps giving thanks both to him who afforded the cause of his departure hence, and to him who laid the plot against him, for receiving an honourable reason which he himself furnished not, for showing what he is, to him by his patience, and to the Lord in love, by which even before his birth he was manifested to the Lord, who knew the martyr's choice. With good courage, then, he goes to the Lord, his friend, for whom he voluntarily gave his body, and, as his judges hoped, his soul, hearing from our Savior the words of poetry, "Dear brother," by reason of the similarity of his life. We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love. And the ancients laud the death of those among the Greeks who died in war, not that they advised people to die a violent death, but because he who ends his life in war is released without the dread of dying, severed from the body without experiencing previous suffering or being enfeebled in his soul, as the people that suffer in diseases. For they depart in a state of effeminacy and desiring to live; and therefore

they do not yield up the soul pure, but bearing with it their lusts like weights of lead; all but those who have been conspicuous in virtue. Some die in battle with their lusts, these being in no respect different from what they would have been if they had wasted away by disease.

If the confession to God is martyrdom, each soul which has lived purely in the knowledge of God, which has obeyed the commandments, is a witness both by life and word, in whatever way it may be released from the body,—shedding faith as blood along its whole life till its departure. For instance, the Lord says in the Gospel, "Whosoever shall leave father, or mother, or brethren," and so forth, "for the sake of the gospel and my name," he is blessed; not indicating simple martyrdom, but the gnostic martyrdom, as of the man who has conducted himself according to the rule of the gospel, in love to the Lord (for the knowledge of the Name and the understanding of the gospel point out the gnosis, but not the bare appellation), so as to leave his worldly kindred, and wealth, and every possession, in order to lead a life free from passion. . . .

. . . Now some of the heretics who have misunderstood the Lord, have at once an impious and cowardly love of life; saying that the true martyrdom is the knowledge of the only true God (which we also admit), and that the man is a self-murderer and a suicide who makes confession by death; and adducing other similar sophisms of cowardice. To these we shall reply at the proper time; for they differ with us in regard to first principles. Now we, too, say that those who have rushed on death (for there are some, not belonging to us, but sharing the name merely, who are in haste to give themselves up, the poor wretches dying through hatred to the Creator)—these, we say, banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of believing martyrdom, inasmuch as they have not known the only true God, but give themselves up to a vain death, as the Gymnosophists of the Indians to useless fire.

TERTULLIAN (c. 160–c. 220)

from *To the Martyrs* (expanded in Archive)

from *The Crown of Martyrdom*

Tertullian, born a Roman citizen at or near Carthage, was originally a pagan, the son of a Roman centurion. He was educated in rhetoric and law, the standard education of a well-to-do Roman, and converted to Christianity before the year 197. Following his conversion, Tertullian traveled through Greece and Asia Minor before settling in Carthage and marrying. According to St. Jerome, he served the church as a presbyter. He wrote numerous theological treatises, apologies, and attacks on various heresies, and was the first important Christian theologian to write in Latin. According to Augustine, Tertullian broke with Montanism and in his later years formed his own sect, the Tertullianists; some modern scholars assert that the sect was simply named after

him. In either case, the sect survived some two centuries until the time of Augustine. Because of his apostasy, Tertullian was scorned in antiquity, but in the 19th and 20th centuries has been reconsidered to be a seminal figure in early Christianity and, with Augustine, one of the preeminent formative fathers of modern Christianity.

*Tertullian's literary style was highly individualistic and original: he was witty, vehement, and eloquent, often employing puns and seeming contradictions. His work is often described as legalistic in character. Much of it falls into three main categories: attacks against Jews and other non-Christians (*Apologeticum, *an animated defense of Christians against Roman accusations of depravity and sedition, and* Adversus Judaeos*); denunciations of Christian heresies (*Adversus Valentinianos, *which attacked Gnosticism); and later writings in which he began to be critical of the "visible" Church and became sympathetic to the Montanists, a prophetic sect with a demanding moral code that had become well known from Asia Minor to Africa. Other writings (*De cultu feminarum, *on the proper dress of women, and* De monogamia, *concerning monogamy) dealt with practical and moral issues. Among his many contributions to Christian thought, Tertullian developed the concepts of the Trinity; of the dual nature, divine and human, of Jesus; and of Original Sin; as well as an early version of natural law and the view that Scripture can be interpreted rightly only within the Church, though he later emphasized private interpretation of scriptural texts. He promoted an extreme austerity in dress and fasting. In accordance with Montanist views, he strongly encouraged Christians to embrace persecution and even martyrdom.*

In the early work entitled "To the Martyrs," Tertullian praises past martyrs and invites Christians to accept the "harsher treatment" God has prepared for them and consider the "heavenly glory and divine reward" that awaits the willing martyr. This work and "The Crown of Martyrdom" together provide an account of the merits and benefits of martyrdom. Tertullian's exhortation to martyrdom poses a challenge to the line between suicide and martyrdom; in it, he presents a number of examples of suicide that Roman culture would have respected—Empedocles, Lucretia, Regulus—and argues in effect that Christians too should be respected for their steadfastness in persecution and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their faith.

Sources

Tertullian, "To the Martyrs," chs. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, in *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, trs. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Daly, and Edwin Quain, in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy Defarrari. New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959, pp. 17–29; "The Crown of Martyrdom," from *The Christian's Defense*, in *Fathers of the Church: A Selection of the Writings of the Latin Fathers*, tr. F. A. Wright, London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1928, pp. 48–51.

from TO THE MARTYRS

Blessed martyrs elect, along with the nourishment for the body which our Lady Mother the Church from her breast, as well as individual brethren from their private resources, furnish you in prison, accept also from me some offering that will contribute to the sustenance of the spirit. For it is not good that the flesh be feasted while the spirit goes hungry. . . .

In the first place, then, O blessed, 'do not grieve the Holy Spirit' who has entered prison with you. For, if He had not accompanied you there in your present trial, you would not be there today. See to it, therefore, that He remain with you there and so lead you out of that place to the Lord. Indeed, the prison is the Devil's house, too, where he keeps his household. But you have come to the prison for the purpose of trampling upon him right in his own house. For you have engaged him in battle already outside the prison and trampled him underfoot.

. . . O blessed, consider yourselves as having been transferred from prison to what we may call a place of safety. Darkness is there, but you are the light; fetters are there, but you are free before God. It breathes forth a foul smell, but you are an odor of sweetness. There the judge is expected at every moment, but you are going to pass sentence upon the judges themselves. There sadness may come upon the man who sighs for the pleasures of the world. The Christian, however, even when he is outside the prison, has renounced the world, and, when in prison, even prison itself. It does not matter what part of the world you are in, you who are apart from the world. And if you have missed some of the enjoyments of life, remember that it is the way of business to suffer some losses in order to make larger profits.

. . . The prison now offers to the Christian what the desert once gave to the Prophets. Our Lord Himself quite often spent time in solitude to pray there more freely, to be there away from the world. In fact, it was in a secluded place that He manifested His glory to His disciples. Let us drop the name 'prison' and call it a place of seclusion.

Though the body is confined, though the flesh is detained, there is nothing that is not open to the spirit. In spirit wander about, in spirit take a walk, setting before yourselves not shady promenades and long porticoes but that path which leads to God. As often as you walk that path, you will not be in prison. The leg does not feel the fetter when the spirit is in heaven. The spirit carries about the whole man and brings him wherever he wishes. And where your heart is, there will your treasure be also. There, then, let our heart be where we would have our treasure.

In like manner, O blessed, consider whatever is hard in your present situation as an exercise of your powers of mind and body. You are about to enter a noble contest in which the living God acts the part of superintendent and the Holy Spirit is your trainer, a contest whose crown is eternity, whose prize is angelic nature, citizenship in heaven and glory for ever and ever. And so your Master, Jesus Christ, who has anointed you with His Spirit and has brought you to this training ground, has resolved, before the day of the contest, to take you from a softer way of life to a harsher treatment that your strength may be increased. . . . We who are about to win an eternal [crown] recognize in the prison our training ground, that we may be led forth to the actual contest before the seat of the presiding judge well practiced in all hardships, because strength is built up by austerity, but destroyed by softness.

. . . But let the spirit present to both itself and the flesh the other side of the picture: granted, these sufferings are grievous, yet many have borne them patiently, nay, have even sought them on their own accord for the sake of fame and glory; and this is true not only of men but also of women so that you, too, O blessed women, may be worthy of your sex.

. . . [I]f earthly glory accruing from strength of body and soul is valued so highly that one despises sword, fire, piercing with nails, wild beasts and tortures for the reward of human praise, then I may say the sufferings you endure are but trifling in comparison with the heavenly glory and divine reward. If the bead made of glass is rated so highly, how much must the true

pearl be worth? Who, therefore, does not most gladly spend as much for the true as others spend for the false?

from THE CROWN OF MARTYRDOM

"Why do you Christians complain," you say, "that we persecute you, if you wish to suffer, since you ought to love those by whom you suffer what you wish?" Certainly we wish to suffer, but in the way in which a soldier suffers war. Nobody indeed willingly suffers war, since both panic and danger there must inevitably be faced; but yet the man who just now was complaining about battle fights with all his strength and rejoices when he wins a victory in battle, because he gains both glory and spoil. Our battle is to be summoned before tribunals, where we fight for the truth at the risk of our lives. And our victory is to obtain that for which you strive, a victory which brings with it both the glory of pleasing God and the spoil of eternal life. But, you may say, we are convicted; yes, when we have won the day; we conquer when we are killed, and we escape when we are convicted. You may call us "faggoted" and "axle-men", because bound to a stake half an axle's length we are burned amid heaps of faggots; but that is our garb of victory, our chariot of triumph, our garment decked with palm-leaves. Naturally therefore we do not please those whom we have conquered, and so we are regarded as desperate and reckless men.

Among you, however, such desperation and recklessness raises the standard of virtue in the cause of glory and renown. Mucius, for example, willingly left his right hand in the altar fire: "Oh loftiness of spirit!" Empedocles freely gave all his body to the flames of Etna for the people of Catana's sake: "Oh what strength of mind!" The queen who founded Carthage flung herself upon the pyre in accordance with her marriage vow: "What an encomium for chastity!" Regulus, rather that be the one of all the foemen spared, suffered tortures all over his body: "What a brave man, victorious even in captivity!" Anaxarchus, when he was being crushed to death with a barley pestle, kept saying: "Pound, pound away: it is Anaxarchus' coating, not Anaxarchus himself, that you are pounding": "What a magnanimous philosopher who could even joke about such a death as his!"

In these cases glory was lawful, because it was human, and no imputation of reckless prejudice or desperate conviction was cast upon them when they despised death and every sort of cruelty. They were allowed for country, for empire, and for friendship to suffer what we are not allowed to suffer for God. For all these you cast statues and write inscriptions on their portraits, and engrave them epitaphs to last for ever. Certainly, as far as records can do it, you yourselves confer a kind of resurrection from God, if he should suffer for God, you deem to be mad. Go on, good governors; the mob will think you all the better if you sacrifice Christians to them; crucify, torture, condemn, destroy us; your injustice is the proof of our innocence. For that reason God allows us to suffer these things. Just recently by condemning a Christian woman to the brothel rather than to the wild beasts, you acknowledged that stain upon chastity is reckoned among us as more dreadful than any punishment and any death. Your cruelties, though each be more

elaborate that the last, do not profit you; they serve rather as an attraction to our sect. The more you mow us down the greater our numbers become; our blood is the seed from which new Christians spring.

Many men among yourselves have written exhortations for the endurance of pain and death; Cicero, for example, in the *Tusculans*, Seneca in the treatise *On Chance*, Diogenes, Pyrrho, and Callinicus. But their words do not find as many disciples as the Christians make by their deeds. The very obstinacy, with which you reproach us, is our best teacher. Who is there that is not roused by the sight of it to ask what there is really within it? Who does not join us when once he has asked? Who does not long to suffer, when once he has joined, that he may buy back the whole grace of God and procure all indulgence from Him by the payment of his own blood? To this action all sins are forgiven. Hence it is that even in court we thank you for your verdict. There is an enmity between what is of God and what is of man; and when we are condemned by you we are acquitted by God.

BHAGAVAD-GITA
(3rd century)

from *The Way to Eternal Brahman*

The Bhagavad-Gita, *perhaps the best-loved of the Hindu religious texts, was probably composed in the 3rd century* A.D. *and later inserted into the great work of the Hindu epic period, the* Mahabharata. *The* Mahabharata, *a poem of some 100,000 verses composed between about 300* B.C. *and 300* A.D., *is an account of the origins, conduct, and consequences of a great war—said to have taken place in 900* B.C.*—between two royal families, the Pandavas (the five sons of Pandu, of whom the third son Arjuna is the central figure) and the Kauravas (their cousins, the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra). Within this long epic, the portion known as the* Bhagavad-Gita, *or* Song of God, *opens just before the battle begins, as Arjuna, repulsed by the thought of the carnage the war would involve, decides to lay down his arms. Krishna, his friend and confidant, the god Vishnu in human form, who is serving as his charioteer, is disappointed, and thus begins a debate between the two over whether Arjuna should fight.*

The Bhagavad-Gita *stands as one of the most prominent and authoritative works in Hindu religious literature, and together with the* Upanishads *[q.v.] and the* Brahma-Sutra *is regarded as part of the basic trio of essential texts. Despite its primary significance in Indian thought, however, the* Gita, *like the entire* Mahabharata, *is not classified as* shruti, *or divine truth revealed by deity, but is instead considered to be* smriti, *or inspired teachings that explain or clarify divine truth. Regardless of its classification, the epic has profoundly influenced Hindu political, intellectual, and philosophical life throughout the centuries since its composition.*

The majority of the Bhagavad-Gita *consists of the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna occurring just before the great battle on the plain of Kurukshetra. In the* Gita *dialogue, Shri Krishna ("Shri" refers to his venerated status) embodies Brahman, or the ultimate reality, and at times, he speaks as God. In the selection presented here, Arjuna inquires about the nature of Brahman, and asks how it is revealed at death to a mortal who unites in consciousness with God. Krishna describes a technique to be used by a yogi at death that allows the person to unite with Brahman and thus to escape the cycle of death and rebirth to which all living things are otherwise subject. This escape, referred to as "the path of no return," is called* Deva Yana *in the* Upanishads, *"the path of the bright ones," as distinct from* Pitri Yana, *"the path of the fathers," which does lead to rebirth. (It should be noted that the "realm of Brahma," which is also subject to death and rebirth, is not the same as Brahman (the universal, changeless reality), but instead refers to the highest of the worlds of Hindu mythology, in which "Brahma" designates one of the Hindu trinity, with Vishnu and Shiva.) According to yoga technique referred to in this passage, the yogi must employ a special method of leaving his body at death: first, the vital force is drawn up the* sushumna, *the central spinal passage, and gathered in the brain "between the eyebrows"; the yogi then leaves his body through an aperture in the center of the brain called the* sahasrara. *The technique Krishna describes thus portrays the yogi as taking a voluntary, deliberate, and partly causal role in his own death.*

Source

The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita, VIII: "The Way to Eternal Brahman," trs. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, New York: New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1954, pp. 74–78. Also used for quotations in bibliographic note.

from BHAGAVAD-GITA: THE WAY TO ETERNAL BRAHMAN

ARJUNA: Tell me, Krishna, what Brahman is. What is the Atman, and what is the creative energy of Brahman? Explain the nature of this relative world, and of the individual man.

Who is God who presides over action in this body, and how does He dwell here? How are you revealed at the hour of death to those whose consciousness is united with you?

SRI KRISHNA: Brahman is that which is immutable, and independent of any cause but Itself. When we consider Brahman as lodged within the individual being, we call Him the Atman. The creative energy of Brahman is that which causes all existences to come into being.

The nature of the relative world is mutability. The nature of the individual man is his consciousness of ego. I alone am God who presides over action, here in this body.

At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in me. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life.

Therefore you must remember me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon me constantly, you will come to me. Never doubt this.

Make a habit of practising meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.

He is all-knowing God, lord of the emperors,
Ageless, subtler far than mind's inmost subtlety,
Universal sustainer,
Shining sunlike, self luminous.
What fashion His form has, who shall conceive of it?
He dwells beyond delusion, the dark of Maya.
On Him let man meditate
Always, for then at the last hour
Of going hence from his body he will be strong
In the strength of this yoga, faithfully followed:
The mind is firm, and the heart
So full, it hardly holds its love.
Thus he will take his leave: and now, with the life-force
Indrawn utterly, held fast between the eyebrows,
He goes forth to find his Lord,
That light-giver, who is greatest.

Now I will tell you briefly about the nature of Him who is called the deathless by those seers who truly understand the Vedas. Devotees enter into Him when the bonds of their desire are broken. To reach this goal, they practise control of the passions.

When a man leaves his body and departs, he must close all the doors of the senses. Let him hold the mind firmly within the shrine of the heart, and fix the life-force between the eyebrows. Then let him take refuge in steady concentration, uttering the sacred syllable OM and meditating upon me. Such a man reaches the highest goal. When a yogi has meditated upon me unceasingly for many years, with an undistracted mind, I am easy of access to him, because he is always absorbed in me.

Great souls who find me have found the highest perfection. They are no longer reborn into this condition of transience and pain.

All the worlds, and even the heavenly realm of Brahma, are subject to the laws of rebirth. But for the man who comes to me, there is no returning.

There is day, also, and night in the universe:
The wise know this, declaring the day of Brahma
A thousand ages in span
And the night a thousand ages.

Day dawns, and all those lives that lay hidden asleep
Come forth and show themselves, mortally manifest:
Night falls, and all are dissolved
Into the sleeping germ of life.

Thus they are seen, O Prince, and appear unceasingly,
Dissolving with the dark, and with day returning
Back to the new birth, new death:
All helpless. They do what they must.

But behind the manifest and the unmanifest, there is another Existence, which is eternal and changeless. This is not dissolved in the general cosmic dissolution. It has been called the unmanifest, the imperishable. To reach it is said to be the greatest of all achievements. It is my highest state of being. Those who reach It are not reborn. That highest state of being can only be achieved through devotion to Him in whom all creatures exist, and by whom this universe is pervaded.

I show you two paths.
Let a yogi choose either
When he leaves this body:
The path that leads back to birth,
The path of no return.
There is the path of light,
Of fire and day,
The path of the moon's bright fortnight
And the six months' journey
Of the sun to the north:
The knower of Brahman
Who takes this path
Goes to Brahman:
He does not return.

There is the path of night and smoke,
The path of the moon's dark fortnight
And the six months' journey
Of the sun to the south:
The yogi who takes this path
Will reach the lunar light:
This path leads back
To human birth, at last.

These two paths, the bright and the dark, may be said to have existed in this world of change from a time without any beginning. By the one, a man goes to the place of no return. By the other, he comes back to human birth. No yogi who knows these two paths is ever misled. Therefore, Arjuna, you must be steadfast in yoga, always.

The scriptures declare that merit can be acquired by studying the Vedas, performing ritualistic sacrifices, practising austerities and giving alms. But the yogi who has understood this teaching of mine will gain more than any who do these things. He will reach that universal source, which is the uttermost abode of God.

GENESIS RABBAH (compiled 3rd–5th century)

Commentary on Genesis 9:5

Because of its age and significance, the expository commentary on the book of Genesis *[q.v., under* Hebrew Bible*]* Bereshit Rabbah*, commonly known in English as* Genesis Rabbah*, is considered to be of primary position in the Midrash, a collection of scriptural exegesis and commentary that is part of the larger body of rabbinic literature. The Talmudic literature, including the* Mishnah *and the* Babylonian *[q.v.] and* Palestinian Talmuds*, along with the midrashic commentaries like* Genesis Rabbah*, forms the primary written authority for Jewish civil and religious law.*

The midrashic writings of the rabbinic literature are a collection of biblical exegesis divisible into two main categories: the Midrash Aggadah*, or exegesis with a didactic or edifying purpose, and the* Midrash Halakha*, or exegesis with the purpose of establishing law. The word "midrash" means "to study" or "to investigate," and it is used to signal works of expository exegesis, either didactic or legal, from different periods of time.*

The midrash Genesis Rabbah *is attributed by tradition to the rabbinic teacher R. Hoshaiah, who lived in Palestine during the 3rd century* A.D. *However, there is evidence of numerous later additions to the work, and it is probable that the text was not fixed for several centuries after its original composition.* Genesis Rabbah *is of primary importance in the midrashim, and the biblical commentary it includes has exerted a significant influence on subsequent exegesis and Jewish law.*

In Genesis Rabbah*, the text of* Genesis *is explicated in an unbroken sequence, verse by verse, except for the genealogies and a few repetitious passages, which are omitted. The commentary on* Genesis 9:5 *presented here—just a few short sentences—is of signal importance in Jewish theology and law because it "creatively," as Noam Zohar puts it, finds in this passage the basis for the prohibition of suicide. The commentary defines suicide as a form of murder. However, the fact that the verse is prefaced by "but" or "yet"(omitted in most translations) is taken, following midrashic practice, to signify that the prohibition may also allow for exceptions applies, as in cases like that of Saul, who first asked his armor-bearer to kill him and then fell on his sword to avoid capture and torture by the Philistines, and in cases like those of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah (often called by their foreign names, Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego) in the* Book of Daniel*, where they choose to die in the fiery furnace rather than worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol. No explicit reason is given for such exceptions, though the distinction may refer to the motive for choosing death, rather than the causal manner of bringing it about. Nevertheless, the passage has been of signal importance in Jewish thought, serving to differentiate martyrs from suicides; whether martyrs may actively kill themselves would later be hotly debated in medieval Judaism.*

Source

Genesis Rabbah, tr. Baruch Brody. Material in introduction from Noam Zohar and Daniel J.H. Greenwood.

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS 9:5

This [prohibition of murder (in Genesis 9:5, "but for your life-blood I shall demand satisfaction,")] includes the person who strangles himself. I might think it applies in a case like that of Saul. The verse says "but." I might think that it applies in a case like that of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. The verse says "but."

PLOTINUS (204–270)

from *The Enneads*

On Happiness
On the Primal Good and Secondary Forms of Good
'The Reasoned Dismissal'

Plotinus, the founder and principal exponent of the philosophical school known as Neoplatonism, was born in Egypt; it is not clear whether he was Greek, Roman, or a Hellenized Egyptian. He had a Greek education. He studied for 11 years with the philosopher Ammonius Saccas at Alexandria, and went on the expedition of the Roman emperor Gordian III against Persia in 242–244 in order to learn something about the philosophies of the Persians and Indians, though the expedition failed, Gordian was killed, and Plotinus escaped only with difficulty. Plotinus moved to Rome in 244 and, at the center of an influential circle of intellectuals, lectured on the thought of Plato and the Pythagorean school, as well as on the virtue of asceticism. Plotinus' works were collected and edited by his student, Porphyry, and exist today in an arrangement of six groupings, each having nine books, called the Enneads. *In his last years, Plotinus suffered from an apparently painful and repulsive disease that kept his friends away from him (now assumed to be tuberculosis or, more likely, leprosy), and died at his country estate with his physician Eustochius at his side.*

Plotinus created a system of thought based on Plato's dualism between material object and Form or Idea, dividing Plato's realm of intelligibles into three: the One, Intelligence, and the Soul. For Plotinus, God's power emanates through pure Intelligence to the world of matter; human beings occupy a unique place between the world of Ideas or Intelligence and the world of matter or sensation, belonging to both realms. However, human beings have the potential to relinquish matter and to achieve a union of Soul or Intelligence with God. Given these notions, Plotinus concludes that death is not an evil but actually a good. But this view raises an issue that confronted both Plato and the early Christians: If matter, body, and worldly things are inferior and/

or painful and death is a desired good, then why not hasten the realization of this good through suicide? Plotinus argues against suicide; the "Proficient," (i.e., the person who has mastered true philosophy) has learned not to attend to either positive or painful circumstances and will not commit suicide, an act motivated by passion, except perhaps if he feels he is losing his reason, and then only under "stern necessity."

Source

Plotinus, *Enneads*, Book I, Tractate 4.8, 4.14; Tractate 7.3; Tractate 9, tr. Stephen MacKenna, New York: Pantheon Books, printed in Great Britain by Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 47, 50–51, 66, 78–79. Available online at http://www.ccel.org from the Christian Classic Ethereal Library.

from ENNEADS

Book I, Fourth Tractate: On Happiness

As for violent personal sufferings, he [the Proficient] will carry them off as well as he can; if they overpass his endurance they will carry him off.

And so in all his pain he asks no pity: there is always the radiance in the inner soul of the man, untroubled like the light in a lantern when fierce gusts beat about it in a wild turmoil of wind and tempest.

But what if he be put beyond himself? What if pain grow so intense and so torture him that the agony all but kills? Well, when he is put to torture he will plan what is to be done: he retains his freedom of action.

Besides we must remember that the Proficient sees things very differently from the average man; neither ordinary experiences nor pains and sorrows, whether touching himself or others, pierce to the inner hold. To allow them any such passage would be a weakness in our soul.

And it is a sign of weakness, too, if we should think it gain not to hear of miseries, gain to die before they come: this is not concern for others' welfare but for our own peace of mind. Here we see our imperfection: we must not indulge it, we must put it from us and cease to tremble over what perhaps may be.

Anyone that says that it is in human nature to grieve over misfortune to our household must learn that this is not so with all, and that, precisely, it is virtue's use to raise the general level of nature towards the better and finer, above the mass of men. And the finer is to set at nought what terrifies the common mind.

We cannot be indolent: this is an arena for the powerful combatant holding his ground against the blows of fortune, and knowing that, sore though they be to some natures, they are little to his, nothing dreadful, nursery terrors.

So, the Proficient would have desired misfortune?

It is precisely to meet the undesired when it appears that he has the virtue which gives him, to confront it, his passionless and unshakeable soul.

For man, and especially the Proficient, is not the Couplement of Soul and body: the proof is that man can be disengaged from the body and disdain its nominal goods.

It would be absurd to think that happiness begins and ends with the living-body: happiness is the possession of the good of life: it is centered therefore in Soul, is an Act of the Soul—and not of all the Soul at that: for it certainly is not characteristic of the vegetative soul, the soul of growth; that would at once connect it with the body.

A powerful frame, a healthy constitution, even a happy balance of temperament, these surely do not make felicity; in the excess of these advantages there is, even, the danger that the man be crushed down and forced more and more within their power. There must be a sort of counter-pressure in the other direction, towards the noblest: the body must be lessened, reduced, that the veritable man may show forth, the man behind the appearances.

Let the earth-bound man be handsome and powerful and rich, and so apt to this world that he may rule the entire human race: still there can be no envying him, the fool of such lures. Perhaps such splendours could not, from the beginning even, have gathered to the Proficient; but if it should happen so, he of his own action will lower his state, if he has any care for his true life; the tyranny of the body he will work down or wear away by inattention to its claims; the rulership he will lay aside. While he will safeguard his bodily health, he will not wish to be wholly untried in sickness, still less never to feel pain: if such troubles should not come to him of themselves, he will wish to know them, during youth at least: in old age, it is true, he will desire neither pains nor pleasures to hamper him; he will desire nothing of this world, pleasant or painful; his one desire will be to know nothing of the body. If he should meet with pain he will pit against it the powers he holds to meet it; but pleasure and health and ease of life will not mean any increase of happiness to him nor will their contraries destroy or lessen it.

When in the one subject a positive can add nothing, how can the negative take away?

Book I, Seventh Tractate: On the Primal Good and Secondary Forms of Good

Life is a partnership of a Soul and body; death is the dissolution; in either life or death, then, the Soul will feel itself at home.

But, again, if life is good, how can death be anything but evil?

Remember that the good of life, where it has any good at all, is not due to anything in the partnership but to the repelling of evil by virtue; death, then, must be the greater good.

In a word, life in the body is of itself an evil but the Soul enters its Good through Virtue, not living the life of the Couplement but holding itself apart, even here.

Book I, Ninth Tractate: 'The Reasoned Dismissal'

'You will not dismiss your Soul lest it go forth taking something with it.'

Your dismissal will ensure that it must go forth taking something (corporeal) with it, and its going forth is to some new place. The Soul will wait for the body to be completely severed from it; then it makes no departure; it simply finds itself free.

But how does the body come to be separated?

The separation takes place when nothing of Soul remains bound up with it: the harmony within the body, by virtue of which the Soul was retained, is broken and it can no longer hold its guest.

But when a man contrives the dissolution of the body, it is he that has used violence and torn himself away, not the body that has let the Soul slip from it. And in loosing the bond he has not been without passion; there has been revolt or grief or anger, movements which it is unlawful to indulge.

But if a man feel himself to be losing his reason?

That is not likely in the Proficient, but if it should occur, it must be classed with the inevitable, to be welcome at the bidding of the fact though not for its own sake. To call upon drugs to the release of the Soul seems a strange way of assisting its purposes.

And if there be a period allotted to all by fate, to anticipate the hour could not be a happy act, unless, as we have indicated, under stern necessity.

If everyone is to hold in the other world a standing determined by the state in which he quitted this, there must be no withdrawal as long as there is any hope of progress.

LACTANTIUS (c. 240–c. 320)

from *The Divine Institutes*

Born sometime between 230 and 260 in proconsular North Africa to a non-Christian family who lived at Carthage, Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius became a rhetorician and professor of oratory in Nicomedia, in northwest Asia Minor. Known for his Latin prose style, he was sometimes called the "Christian Cicero" by Renaissance scholars. He had been appointed (c. 290) to his professorship at Nicomedia by the Roman emperor Diocletian, but when Diocletian began to initiate what came to be known as the Great Persecution, Lactantius, who had converted to Christianity by this time, resigned his professorship (c. 305) and began to write defenses of Christian theology for both Christians and non-Christian academics. He sought to refute polytheism and to show the falsity of pagan philosophy while demonstrating the truth of Christian tenets. After Constantine became emperor, he lifted Lactantius out of poverty and invited him to Trier to tutor his son, Crispus.

In The Divine Institutes (303–310), the first systematic summary in Latin of Christian teaching, Lactantius attacks Greek and Roman views of suicide. He addresses Plato's view of the immortality of the soul and Cicero's view that death will be better than life, or at least no worse. Lactantius replies, on the contrary, that death cannot be assumed to be good, but relative to a good or bad life lived. Lactantius also claims that the venerated Stoic examples of suicide, including such notable instances as that of Cato, were actually homicide victims of Stoic philosophy. Lactantius derides what he sees as an erroneous pagan "balance-sheet" mentality weighing pleasure against pain. Lactantius is the first writer in the Christian tradition to argue, as he does in this work, that killing oneself is worse than killing another person, a view that gains considerable currency in later Christian thought.

The dates of Lactantius' life are not known. Estimates of his lifespan generally range between the years 240 and 330.

Sources

Lactantius, The Divine Institutes, Book III, from chs. 18–19, tr. Rev. William Fletcher, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7, Buffalo, 1886; New York, 1899–1900. Available online at www.ccel.org from the Christian Classic Ethereal Library.

from THE DIVINE INSTITUTES

The Pythagoreans and Stoics, While They Hold the Immortality of the Soul, Foolishly Persuade a Voluntary Death

Others, again, discuss things contrary to these, namely, that the soul survives after death; and these are chiefly the Pythagoreans and Stoics. And although they are to be treated with indulgence because they perceive the truth, yet I cannot but blame them, because they fell upon the truth not by their opinion, but by accident. And thus they erred in some degree even in that very matter which they rightly perceived. For, since they feared the argument by which it is inferred that the soul must necessarily die with the body, because it is born with the body, they asserted that the soul is not born with the body, but rather introduced into it, and that it migrates from one body to another. They did not consider that it was possible for the soul to survive the body, unless it should appear to have existed previously to the body. There is therefore an equal and almost similar error on each side. But the one side are deceived with respect to the past, the other with respect to the future. For no one saw that which is most true, that the soul is both created and does not die, because they were ignorant why that came to pass, or what was the nature of man. Many therefore of them, because they suspected that the soul is immortal, laid violent hands upon themselves, as though they were about to depart to heaven. Thus it was with Cleanthes and Chrysippus, with Zeno, and Empedocles, who in the dead of night cast himself into a cavity of the burning Ætna, that when he had suddenly disappeared it might be believed that he had departed to the gods; and thus also of the Romans Cato died, who through the whole of his life was an imitator of Socratic ostentation. For Democritus was of another persuasion. But, however, "By his own spontaneous act he offered up his head to death"; and nothing can be more wicked than this. For if a homicide is guilty because he is a destroyer of man, he who puts himself to death is under the same guilt, because he puts to death a man. Yea, that crime may be considered to be greater, the punishment of which belongs to God alone. For as we did not come into this life of our own accord; so, on the other hand, we can only withdraw from this habitation of the body which has been appointed for us to keep, by the command of Him who placed us in this body that we may inhabit it, until He orders us to depart from it; and if any violence is offered to us, we must endure it with equanimity, since the death of an innocent person cannot be unavenged, and since we have a great Judge who alone always has the power of taking vengeance in His hands.

All these philosophers, therefore, were homicides; and Cato himself, the chief of Roman wisdom, who, before he put himself to death, is said to have read through the treatise of Plato which he wrote on the immortality of the soul, and was led by the authority of the philosopher to the commission of this great crime; yet he, however, appears to have had some cause for death in his hatred of slavery. Why should I speak of the Ambraciot [Theombrotus] who, having read the same treatise, threw himself into the sea, for no other cause than that he believed Plato?—a doctrine altogether detestable and to be avoided, if it drives men from life. But if Plato had known and taught by whom, and how, and to whom, and on account of what actions, and at what time, immortality is given, he would neither have driven Cleombrotus [Theombrotus] nor Cato to a voluntary death, but he would have trained them to live with justice. For it appears to me that Cato sought a cause for death, not so much that he might escape from Cæsar, as that he might obey the decrees of the Stoics, whom he followed, and might make his name distinguished by some great action; and I do not see what evil could have happened to him if he had lived. For Caius Cæsar, such was his clemency, had no other object, even in the very heat of civil war, than to appear to deserve well of the state, by preserving two excellent citizens, Cicero and Cato. But let us return to those who praise death as a benefit. You complain of life as though you had lived, or had ever settled with yourself why you were born at all. May not therefore the true and common Father of all justly find fault with that saying of Terence:—

> "First, learn in what life consists; then, if you shall be dissatisfied with life, have recourse to death."

You are indignant that you are exposed to evils; as though you deserved anything good, who are ignorant of your Father, Lord, and King; who, although you behold with your eyes the bright light, are nevertheless blind in mind, and lie in the depths of the darkness of. . . .

. . . [T]hose who assert the advantage of death, because they know nothing of the truth, thus reason: If there is nothing after death, death is not an evil; for it takes away the perception of evil. But if the soul survives, death is even an advantage; because immortality follows. And this sentiment is thus set forth by Cicero concerning the Laws: "We may congratulate ourselves, since death is about to bring either a better state than that which exists in life, or at any rate not a worse. For if the soul is in a state of vigour without the body, it is a divine life; and if it is without perception, assuredly there is no evil." Cleverly argued, as it appeared to himself, as though there could be no other state. But each conclusion is false. For the sacred writings teach that the soul is not annihilated; but that it is either rewarded according to its righteousness, or eternally punished according to its crimes. For neither is it right, that he who has lived a life of wickedness in prosperity should escape the punishment which he deserves; nor that he who has been wretched on account of his righteousness, should be deprived of his reward. And this is so true, that Tully also, in his *Consolation*, declared that the righteous and the wicked do not inhabit the same abodes. For those same wise men, he says, did not judge that the same course was open for all into the heaven; for they taught that those who were contaminated by vices and crimes were thrust down into darkness, and lay in the mire; but that, on the other hand, souls that were chaste, pure, upright, and uncontaminated, being also refined by the study and practice of virtue, by a light and easy course take their flight to the gods, that is, to a nature resembling their own.

But this sentiment is opposed to the former argument. For that is based on the assumption that every man at his birth is presented with immortality. What distinction, therefore, will there be between virtue and guilt, if it makes no difference whether a man be Aristides or Phalaris, whether he be Cato or Catiline? But a man does not perceive this opposition between sentiments and actions, unless he is in possession of the truth. If any one, therefore, should ask me whether death is a good or an evil, I shall reply that its character depends upon the course of the life. For as life itself is a good if it is passed virtuously, but an evil if it is spent viciously, so also death is to be weighed in accordance with the past actions of life. And so it comes to pass, that if life has been passed in the service of God, death is not an evil, for it is a translation to immortality. But if not so, death must necessarily be an evil, since it transfers men, as I have said, to everlasting punishment. . . .

. . . What, then, shall we say, but that they are in error who either desire death as a good, or flee from life as an evil? unless they are most unjust, who do not weigh the fewer evils against the greater number of blessings. For when they pass all their lives in a variety of the choicest gratifications, if any bitterness has chanced to succeed to these, they desire to die; and they so regard it as to appear never to have fared well, if at any time they happen to fare ill. Therefore they condemn the whole of life, and consider it as nothing else than filled with evils. Hence arose that foolish sentiment, that this state which we imagine to be life is death, and that that which we fear as death is life; and so that the first good is not to be born, that the second is an early death. . . .

EUSEBIUS (c. 260–339)

from *Ecclesiastical History*

Eusebius, referred to as Eusebius of Caesarea, was the first and most prominent historian of early Christianity. He lived most of his life in Caesarea Maritima. He was also known as Eusebius Pamphili, taking the surname from his friend and mentor Pamphilus of Caesarea, whose expansive library—founded by Origen—provided Eusebius with historical records for his later works. Eusebius fled to the Egyptian desert following the martyrdom of Pamphilus during the persecutions under Diocletian, but was arrested and imprisoned. After his release, Eusebius became bishop of Caesarea, around 313 or 314. As a supporter of Arius and the leader of the Origenist Semi-Arians, the middle party in the Arian conflict over the theological issue of whether belief in Christ as being fully God could be reconciled with strict monotheism, Eusebius held that the nature of the Trinity could not be rationally understood. He was excommunicated by the synod of Antioch for this view; however, he was later exonerated by the emperor Constantine I. Eusebius played a role in the council of Nicaea in 325, where he tried to reconcile the opposing parties while repudiating extreme Arianism.

Appointed under Constantine as court historian, Eusebius wrote both religious and secular histories, as well as several Christian apologies. He was an immensely prolific writer, although his treatments of some issues are inadequate and his historical accounts are often selective and difficult to distinguish from apologetics; some have denounced him as dishonest, though his works are nevertheless of great value, preserving in excerpts many sources that would have otherwise been lost. Eusebius was the author of the Chronicon, *a history of the world from the famous peoples of antiquity to the year 303 (later continued to 325), and the* Historia Ecclesiastica, *a history of the Church from its beginning up to the year 324, as well as many apologetic, exegetical, and dogmatic works. The* Ecclesiastical History *is the first major attempt to explain the relationship of Christianity and the Roman Empire; its approach in describing the development of the church is primarily historical, and it has been described as both a political theology and a theology of history.*

In Book 2 of the Ecclesiastical History, *Eusebius narrates the suicide of a woman of Antioch—by legend, St. Pelagia—and her two daughters who, to avoid sexual violation by the Roman soldiers guarding them, ended their lives by throwing themselves into a river. This account occurs among reports of other martyrs who endured extraordinary suffering without resorting to suicide and, as does the more celebratory account of the self-drowning of Pelagia later given by Ambrose [q.v.], implicitly recognizes the challenges in distinguishing between suicide and genuine martyrdom among Christians who did kill themselves to avoid violence.*

Sources

The Church History of Eusebius, Book 8, ch. 12, tr. Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff, ed., New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890, Vol. I: Eusebius Pamphilus. Available online at www.ccel.org from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

from ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

Many Others, Both Men and Women, Who Suffered in Various Ways

Why need we mention the rest by name, or number the multitude of the men, or picture the various sufferings of the admirable martyrs of Christ? Some of them were slain with the axe, as in Arabia. The limbs of some were broken, as in Cappadocia. Some, raised on high by the feet, with their heads down, while a gentle fire burned beneath them, were suffocated by the smoke which arose from the burning wood, as was done in Mesopotamia. Others were mutilated by cutting off their noses and ears and hands, and cutting to pieces the other members and parts of their bodies, as in Alexandria.

Why need we revive the recollection of those in Antioch who were roasted on grates, not so as to kill them, but so as to subject them to a lingering punishment? Or of others who preferred to thrust their right hand into the fire rather than touch the impious sacrifice? Some, shrinking from the trial, rather than be taken and fall into the hands of their enemies, threw themselves from lofty houses, considering death preferable to the cruelty of the impious.

A certain holy person,—in soul admirable for virtue, in body a woman,—who was illustrious beyond all in Antioch for wealth and family and reputation, had brought up in the principles of religion her two daughters, who were now in the freshness and bloom of life. Since great envy was excited on their account, every means was used to find them in their concealment; and when it was ascertained that they were away, they were summoned deceitfully to Antioch. Thus they were caught in the nets of the soldiers. When the woman saw herself and her daughters thus helpless, and knew the things terrible to speak of that men would do to them,—and the most unbearable of all terrible things, the threatened violation of their chastity,—she exhorted herself and the maidens that they ought not to submit even to hear of this. For, she said, that to surrender their souls to the slavery of demons was worse than all deaths and destruction; and she set before them the only deliverance from all these things,—escape to Christ.

They then listened to her advice. And after arranging their garments suitably, they went aside from the middle of the road, having requested of the guards a little time for retirement, and cast themselves into a river which was flowing by.

Thus they destroyed themselves. But there were two other virgins in the same city of Antioch who served God in all things, and were true sisters, illustrious in family and distinguished in life, young and blooming, serious in mind, pious in deportment, and admirable for zeal. As if the earth could not bear such excellence, the worshipers of demons commanded to cast them into the sea. And this was done to them.

In Pontus, others endured sufferings horrible to hear. Their fingers were pierced with sharp reeds under their nails. Melted lead, bubbling and boiling with the heat, was poured down the backs of others, and they were roasted in the most sensitive parts of the body.

Others endured on their bowels and privy members shameful and inhuman and unmentionable torments, which the noble and law-observing judges, to show their severity, devised, as more honorable manifestations of wisdom. And new tortures were continually invented, as if they were endeavoring, by surpassing one another, to gain prizes in a contest.

But at the close of these calamities, when finally they could contrive no greater cruelties, and were weary of putting to death, and were filled and satiated with the shedding of blood, they turned to what they considered merciful and humane treatment, so that they seemed to be no longer devising terrible things against us.

For they said that it was not fitting that the cities should be polluted with the blood of their own people, or that the government of their rulers, which was kind and mild toward all, should be defamed through excessive cruelty; but that rather the beneficence of the humane and royal authority should be extended to all, and we should no longer be put to death. For the infliction of this punishment upon us should be stopped in consequence of the humanity of the rulers.

Therefore it was commanded that our eyes should be put out, and that we should be maimed in one of our limbs. For such things were humane in their sight, and the lightest of punishments for us. So that now on account of this kindly treatment accorded us by the impious, it was impossible to tell the incalculable number of those whose right eyes had first been cut out with the sword, and then had been cauterized with fire; or who had been disabled in the left foot by burning the joints, and afterward condemned to the provincial copper mines, not so much for service as for distress and hardship. Besides all these, others

encountered other trials, which it is impossible to recount; for their manly endurance surpasses all description.

In these conflicts the noble martyrs of Christ shone illustrious over the entire world, and everywhere astonished those who beheld their manliness; and the evidences of the truly divine and unspeakable power of our Saviour were made manifest through them. To mention each by name would be a long task, if not indeed impossible.

AMBROSE (337/340–397)

from *Of Virgins: Letter to Marcellina*

Born in the city of Trier (modern Germany), Ambrose of Milan became a noted theologian, biblical critic, and hymnist, later canonized as a saint and considered the father of liturgical music. He is also known as the spiritual teacher who converted and baptized Augustine of Hippo [q.v.]. Ambrose's father, the praetorian prefect of Gaul, died soon after Ambrose's birth, and he was taken by his mother to Rome, where he was educated in rhetoric, classical literature, and in Stoic thought. Ambrose entered politics and in about 370, he became governor of Aemilia-Liguria, a province in northern Italy. Four years later, Ambrose was unexpectedly acclaimed bishop of Milan by the people—he received baptism and was consecrated bishop one week later. He served as bishop for 23 years until his death in 397. As bishop, Ambrose was committed to establishing orthodox Christian doctrine, defining Church authority, and disestablishing pagan state religion. When in 388 a local bishop instigated a mob that burned and looted a synagogue at Callinicum in Syria, Ambrose held, against the emperor Theodosius's order that the bishop rebuild it, that it would be apostasy for the bishop to rebuild a place of worship for the enemies of Christ and that religious interests should prevail over the maintenance of civil law; after a stadium massacre in Thessalonica engineered by Theodosius, Ambrose threatened to excommunicate the emperor, though he later became Theodosius' ally in the Church.

Ambrose was extremely influential in forming Christian discussion of church-state relations. As a Christian intellectual, he was also influential in integrating faith and reason within church theology, and was an important figure in the Arian controversy. His principal works include "On Faith" (380), a defense of orthodoxy against Arianism; "On the Duties of the Clergy" (386), a treatment of Christian ethical obligations; numerous Biblical commentaries, including Hexaemaeron *("On the Six Days of Creation"); "On the Goodness of Death"; and sermons and hymns, including* Aeterne rerum Conditor *("Framer of the earth and sky") and* Deus Creator omnium *("Maker of all things, God most high").*

The following selection from Ambrose's Of Virgins *is a letter to his elder sister Marcellina. In 353, on the feast of the Epiphany, in the presence of the Pope, Marcellina had dedicated her virginity to God and vowed to live an ascetic life; she and her mother formed the core of one of the first groups of patrician women in Rome who renounced the world for their Christian*

beliefs. As virginity became increasingly celebrated, the issue of whether a virgin might kill herself to escape sexual violation had become an increasingly controversial matter. The view that rape was the worst thing that could befall a Christian woman had become widespread; for Christians, as Tertullian [q.v.] had put it, ". . . a stain upon chastity is reckoned among us as more dreadful than any punishment and any death." Eusebius [q.v.] had narrated the story of the woman of Antioch and her two daughters who had drowned themselves in the river to avoid rape; his implicit evaluation of the incident is equivocal. Here, Ambrose relates with similar imagery the story of the 15-year-old Pelagia, later venerated as a saint, who together with her mother and sisters also seek death by drowning rather than be raped. Ambrose, clearly regarding them as virtuous rather than sinful, interprets these suicides as a form of martyrdom to be revered.

Source

St. Ambrose, "Concerning Virgins," Book III, ch. 7:32-39. From *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, Vol. 10, pp. 386–387. Available online at www.ccel.org from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

from OF VIRGINS: LETTER TO MARCELLINA

As I am drawing near the close of my address, you [Marcellina] make a good suggestion, holy sister, that I should touch upon what we ought to think of the merits of those who have cast themselves down from a height, or have drowned themselves in a river, lest they should fall into the hands of persecutors, seeing that holy Scripture forbids a Christian to lay hands on himself. And indeed as regard; virgins placed in the necessity of preserving their purity, we have a plain answer, seeing that there exists an instance of martyrdom.

Saint Pelagia lived formerly at Antioch, being about fifteen years old, a sister of virgins, and a virgin herself. She shut herself up at home at the first sound of persecution, seeing herself surrounded by those who would rob her of her faith and purity, in the absence of her mother and sisters, without any defence, but all the more filled with God. "What are we to do, unless," says she to herself, "thou, a captive of virginity, takest thought? I both wish and fear to die, for I meet not death but seek it. Let us die if we are allowed, or if they will not allow it, still let us die. God is not offended by a remedy against evil, and faith permits the act. In truth, if we think of the real meaning of the word, how can what is voluntary be violence? It is rather violence to wish to die and not to be able. And we do not fear any difficulty. For who is there who wishes to die and is not able to do so, when there are so many easy ways to death? For I can now rush upon the sacrilegious altars and overthrow them, and quench with my blood the kindled fires. I am not afraid that my right hand may fail to deliver the blow, or that my breast may shrink from the pain. I shall leave no sin to my flesh. I fear not that a sword will

be wanting. I can die by my own weapons, I can die without the help of an executioner, in my mother's bosom."

She is said to have adorned her head, and to have put on a bridal dress, so that one would say that she was going to a bridegroom, not to death. But when the hateful persecutors saw that they had lost the prey of her chastity, they began to seek her mother and sisters. But they, by a spiritual flight, already held the field of chastity, when, as on the one side, persecutors suddenly threatened them, and on the other, escape was shut off by an impetuous river, they said, what do we fear? See the water, what hinders us from being baptized? And this is the baptism whereby sins are forgiven, and kingdoms are sought. This is a baptism after which no one sins. Let the water receive us, which is wont to regenerate. Let the water receive us, which makes virgins. Let the water receive us, which opens heaven, protects the weak, hides death, makes martyrs. We pray Thee, God, Creator of all things, let not the water scatter our bodies, deprived of the breath of life; let not death separate our obsequies, whose lives affection has always conjoined; but let our constancy be one, our death one, and our burial also be one.

Having said these words, and having slightly girded up the bosom of their dress, to veil their modesty without impeding their steps, joining hands as though to lead a dance, they went forward to the middle of the river bed, directing their steps to where the stream was more violent, and the depth more abrupt. No one drew back, no one ceased to go on, no one tried where to place her steps, they were anxious only when they felt the ground, grieved when the water was shallow, and glad when it was deep. One could see the pious mother tightening her grasp, rejoicing in her pledges, afraid of a fall lest even the stream should carry off her daughters from her. "These victims, O Christ," said she, "do I offer as leaders of chastity, guides on my journey, and companions of my sufferings."

But who would have cause to wonder that they had such constancy whilst alive, seeing that even when dead they preserved the position of their bodies unmoved? The water did not lay bare their corpses, nor did the rapid course of the river roll them along. Moreover, the holy mother, though without sensation, still maintained her loving grasp, and held the sacred knot which she had tied, and loosed not her hold in death, that she who had paid her debt to religion might die leaving her piety as her heir. For those whom she had joined together with herself for martyrdom, she claimed even to the tomb.

But why use instances of people of another race to you, my sister, whom the inspiration of hereditary chastity has taught by descent from a martyred ancestor? For whence have you learnt who had no one from whom to learn, living in the country, with no virgin companion, instructed by no teacher? You have played the part then not of a disciple, for this cannot be done without teaching, but of an heir of virtue.

For how could it come to pass that holy Sotheris should not have been the originator of your purpose, who is an ancestor of your race? Who, in an age of persecution, borne to the heights of suffering by the insults of slaves, gave to the executioner even her face, which is usually free from injury when the whole body is tortured, and rather beholds than suffers torments; so brave and patient that when she offered her tender cheeks to punishment, the executioner failed in striking before the martyr yielded under the injuries. She moved not her face, she turned not away her countenance, she uttered not a groan or a tear. Lastly, when she had overcome other kinds of punishment, she found the sword which she desired.

AUGUSTINE (354–430)

from *The City of God* (expanded in Archive)
from *On Free Choice of the Will* (expanded in Archive)

Born to a small landholder, Patricius, and a pious Christian, Monica, in the small town of Thagaste in the Roman province of Numidia (modern Souk-Ahras, Algeria), Augustine of Hippo was of profound influence on the history of Western thought. Augustine studied rhetoric and classical philosophy at Carthage and was initially attracted to the dualistic religious philosophy of Manichaeanism. By the time he was 19, in 373, his mistress had borne him a son, Adeodatus. In 383, Augustine traveled to Rome where he was unsuccessful in establishing a school. He then moved to teach rhetoric in Milan for two years, where he met the bishop Ambrose and the community around him of Christian Neoplatonists. Augustine found within Christianity's teachings satisfactory answers to questions about the being of God and the nature of evil, but—torn by his desires and the demands of chastity as a Christian sexual virtue—he did not undergo full conversion until 386. Ambrose baptized him, together with his son Adeodatus, on the night of Holy Saturday, before Easter of 387. After Adeodatus's death, Augustine was ordained a presbyter of Hippo in 391; five years later, he became bishop of Hippo, and continued in that position until his death in 430, during the third month of the Vandals' siege of Hippo.

Augustine's principal works include the Confessions *(397–400), an autobiographical account of his spiritual struggles and conversion to Christianity, and* The City of God *(413–426), a Christian vision of history. He also wrote many tracts against the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians. In his writings, Augustine addresses many issues, including original sin, grace, revelation, creation* ex nihilo*, the nature of time, divine foreknowledge, and predestination, and develops the idea of the church as a community of believers, just and predestined for immortality.*

In The City of God*, Augustine addresses the issue of suicide more directly and comprehensively than any previous writer in the Christian tradition. The full title of the work is* Twenty-Four Books of the City of God Against the Pagans*; within the framework of its more general effort to counter the accusation that it was Christianity that had led to the fall of Rome to the Ostrogoths in 410, the work also attacks the Roman—especially Stoic—conception of suicide as a matter of heroism and virtue, whether committed for political reasons, to protect chastity, or to avoid personal difficulties. Though antecedents of some of his views may be detected in earlier writers, Augustine's overall treatment of the issues in suicide is strikingly original. With respect to the issue of whether a virgin threatened with sexual violation may kill herself to avoid it—the dispute already addressed by Eusebius [q.v.], Ambrose [q.v.], and other earlier writers—Augustine defuses the issue by asserting that sexual violation affects the body only, not the soul, and is a matter of the purity or impurity of the victim's intentions rather than material, physical fact; this position remains definitive for the Christian tradition thereafter. Augustine's treatment of Biblical suicides like Samson and Saul [q.v., under Hebrew Bible] is also novel; it relies on a*

divine-command theory in assessing the ethics of suicide and holds that only those suicides directly commanded by God are permissible. Not all later writers accept Augustine's argument that in the cases of Samson and Saul, there must have been a "special commission" from God, but Augustine's treatment of them has been widely influential. Also significant in Augustine's treatment of suicide is his "two-person" model, evoked by many later writers and associated with what contemporary writers now identify as the ambivalence of suicide: one part of a person or of a person's psyche—in Augustine's view, the guilty, murderous part—kills the other part of that same person, the (as he says of Lucretia [q.v., under Livy]) "guiltless, chaste, coerced part." Finally, in the last portion of the selection provided here, Augustine addresses what some later thinkers have argued is the deepest issue about suicide for the Christian tradition as a whole, the tension between the promise of a personal afterlife and the wrongness of seeking death to achieve it. If Christian belief promises a heavenly afterlife for those without sin, but one is always at risk of sin while in the body in this life, why wouldn't the believer commit suicide to reach that afterlife, just after confessing, repenting, and receiving absolution for all previous sins? Augustine's reply to this question becomes definitive for virtually the entire remainder of the Christian tradition: suicide is a worse sin than any that can be avoided by it. It cannot be, so to speak, as later thinkers might call it, a shortcut to heaven.

In On Free Choice of the Will, *Augustine considers a number of skeptical objections to the notion that life is a good: for example, that someone might wish not to exist because he is unhappy or because he fears the afterlife. Augustine interprets suicidal thinking as the desire for respite or peace, and asserts that the suicide thinks of himself as not existing after death—and so is clearly in error. The desire for respite is quite natural, but it leads to a conceptual mistake. To be at peace, whatever one's sufferings have been, one must exist.*

Sources

Augustine, *The City of God*, Book I, ch. 17–27, tr. Rev. Marcus Dods. From *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. II: St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, n.d. Available online at www.ccel.org from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. *On Free Choice of the Will*, tr. Thomas Williams, Book III, sections 6–8, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993, pp. 83–87.

from THE CITY OF GOD

Of Suicide Committed Through Fear of Punishment or Dishonor

And consequently, even if some of these virgins killed themselves to avoid such disgrace, who that has any human feeling would refuse to forgive them? And as for those who would not put an end to their lives, lest they might seem to escape the crime of another by a sin of their own, he who lays this to their charge as a great wickedness is himself not guiltless of the fault of folly. For if it is not lawful to take the law into our own hands, and slay even a guilty person, whose death no public sentence has warranted, then certainly he who kills himself is a homicide, and so much the guiltier of his own death, as he was more innocent of that offence for which he

doomed himself to die. Do we justly execrate the deed of Judas, and does truth itself pronounce that by hanging himself he rather aggravated than expiated the guilt of that most iniquitous betrayal, since, by despairing of God's mercy in his sorrow that wrought death, he left to himself no place for a healing penitence? How much more ought he to abstain from laying violent hands on himself who has done nothing worthy of such a punishment! For Judas, when he killed himself, killed a wicked man; but he passed from this life chargeable not only with the death of Christ, but with his own: for though he killed himself on account of his crime, his killing himself was another crime. Why, then, should a man who has done no ill do ill to himself, and by killing himself kill the innocent to escape another's guilty act, and perpetrate upon himself a sin of his own, that the sin of another may not be perpetrated on him?

That Christians Have No Authority for Committing Suicide in Any Circumstances Whatever

It is not without significance, that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering on the enjoyment of immortality, or of shunning, or ridding ourselves of anything whatever. Nay, the law, rightly interpreted, even prohibits suicide, where it says, "Thou shalt not kill." This is proved especially by the omission of the words "thy neighbor," which are inserted when false witness is forbidden: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Nor yet should any one on this account suppose he has not broken this commandment if he has borne false witness only against himself. For the love of our neighbor is regulated by the love of ourselves, as it is written, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." If, then, he who makes false statements about himself is not less guilty of bearing false witness than if he had made them to the injury of his neighbor; although in the commandment prohibiting false witness only his neighbor is mentioned, and persons taking no pains to understand it might suppose that a man was allowed to be a false witness to his own hurt; how much greater reason have we to understand that a man may not kill himself, since in the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," there is no limitation added nor any exception made in favor of any one, and least of all in favor of him on whom the command is laid! And so some attempt to extend this command even to beasts and cattle, as if it forbade us to take life from any creature. But if so, why not extend it also to the plants, and all that is rooted in and nourished by the earth? For though this class of creatures have no sensation, yet they also are said to live, and consequently they can die; and therefore, if violence be done them, can be killed. So, too, the apostle, when speaking of the seeds of such things as these, says, "That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die;" and in the Psalm it is said, "He killed their vines with hail." Must we therefore reckon it a breaking of this commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," to pull a flower? Are we thus insanely to countenance the foolish error of the Manichæans? Putting aside, then, these ravings, if, when we say, Thou shalt not kill, we do not understand this of the plants, since they have no sensation, nor of the irrational animals that fly, swim, walk, or creep, since they are dissociated from us by their want of reason, and are therefore by the just appointment of the Creator subjected to us to kill or keep alive for our own uses; if so, then it remains that we understand that commandment simply of man. The commandment is, "Thou shall not kill man;" therefore neither another nor yourself, for he who kills himself still kills nothing else than man.

That Suicide Can Never Be Prompted by Magnanimity

But they who have laid violent hands on themselves are perhaps to be admired for their greatness of soul, though they cannot be applauded for the soundness of their judgment. However, if you look at the matter more closely, you will scarcely call it greatness of soul, which prompts a man to kill himself rather than bear up against some hardships of fortune, or sins in which he is not implicated. Is it not rather proof of a feeble mind, to be unable to bear either the pains of bodily servitude or the foolish opinion of the vulgar? And is not that to be pronounced the greater mind, which rather faces than flees the ills of life, and which, in comparison of the light and purity of conscience, holds in small esteem the judgment of men, and specially of the vulgar, which is frequently involved in a mist of error? And, therefore, if suicide is to be esteemed a magnanimous act, none can take higher rank for magnanimity than that Cleombrotus, who (as the story goes), when he had read Plato's book in which he treats of the immortality of the soul, threw himself from a wall, and so passed from this life to that which he believed to be better. For he was not hard pressed by calamity, nor by any accusation, false or true, which he could not very well have lived down; there was, in short, no motive but only magnanimity urging him to seek death, and break away from the sweet detention of this life. And yet that this was a magnanimous rather than a justifiable action, Plato himself, whom he had read, would have told him; for he would certainly have been forward to commit, or at least to recommend suicide, had not the same bright intellect which saw that the soul was immortal, discerned also that to seek immortality by suicide was to be prohibited rather than encouraged.

Again, it is said many have killed themselves to prevent an enemy doing so. But we are not inquiring whether it has been done, but whether it ought to have been done. Sound judgment is to be preferred even to examples, and indeed examples harmonize with the voice of reason; but not all examples, but those only which are distinguished by their piety, and are proportionately worthy of imitation. For suicide we cannot cite the example of patriarchs, prophets, or apostles; though our Lord Jesus Christ, when He admonished them to flee from city to city if they were persecuted, might very well have taken that occasion to advise them to lay violent hands on themselves, and so escape their persecutors. But seeing He did not do this, nor proposed this mode of departing this life, though He were addressing His own friends for whom He had promised to prepare everlasting mansions, it is obvious that such examples as are produced from the "nations that forget God," give no warrant of imitation to the worshippers of the one true God.

That in that Virtue in Which Regulus Excels Cato, Christians Are Pre-Eminently Distinguished

Our opponents are offended at our preferring to Cato the saintly Job, who endured dreadful evils in his body rather than deliver himself from all torment by self-inflicted death; or other saints, of whom it is recorded in our authoritative and trustworthy books that they bore captivity and the oppression of their enemies rather than commit suicide. But their own books authorize us to prefer to Marcus Cato, Marcus Regulus. For Cato had never conquered Cæsar; and when conquered by him, disdained to submit himself to him, and that he might escape this submission put himself to death. Regulus, on the contrary, had formerly conquered the Carthaginians, and in command of the army of Rome had won for the Roman republic a victory which no citizen could bewail, and which the enemy himself was constrained to admire; yet afterwards, when

he in his turn was defeated by them, he preferred to be their captive rather than to put himself beyond their reach by suicide. Patient under the domination of the Carthaginians, and constant in his love of the Romans, he neither deprived the one of his conquered body, nor the other of his unconquered spirit. Neither was it love of life that prevented him from killing himself. This was plainly enough indicated by his unhesitatingly returning, on account of his promise and oath, to the same enemies whom he had more grievously provoked by his words in the senate than even by his arms in battle. Having such a contempt of life, and preferring to end it by whatever torments excited enemies might contrive, rather than terminate it by his own hand, he could not more distinctly have declared how great a crime he judged suicide to be. . . .

That We Should Not Endeavor by Sin to Obviate Sin

But, we are told, there is ground to fear that, when the body is subjected to the enemy's lust, the insidious pleasure of sense may entice the soul to consent to the sin, and steps must be taken to prevent so disastrous a result. And is not suicide the proper mode of preventing not only the enemy's sin, but the sin of the Christian so allured? Now, in the first place, the soul which is led by God and His wisdom, rather than by bodily concupiscence, will certainly never consent to the desire aroused in its own flesh by another's lust. And, at all events, if it be true, as the truth plainly declares, that suicide is a detestable and damnable wickedness, who is such a fool as to say, Let us sin now, that we may obviate a possible future sin; let us now commit murder, lest we perhaps afterwards should commit adultery? If we are so controlled by iniquity that innocence is out of the question, and we can at best but make a choice of sins, is not a future and uncertain adultery preferable to a present and certain murder? Is it not better to commit a wickedness which penitence may heal, than a crime which leaves no place for healing contrition? I say this for the sake of those men or women who fear they may be enticed into consenting to their violator's lust, and think they should lay violent hands on themselves, and so prevent, not another's sin, but their own. But far be it from the mind of a Christian confiding in God, and resting in the hope of His aid; far be it, I say, from such a mind to yield a shameful consent to pleasures of the flesh, howsoever presented. And if that lustful disobedience, which still dwells in our mortal members, follows its own law irrespective of our will, surely its motions in the body of one who rebels against them are as blameless as its motions in the body of one who sleeps.

Whether Voluntary Death Should Be Sought in Order to Avoid Sin

There remains one reason for suicide which I mentioned before, and which is thought a sound one,—namely, to prevent one's falling into sin either through the blandishments of pleasure or the violence of pain. If this reason were a good one, then we should be impelled to exhort men at once to destroy themselves, as soon as they have been washed in the laver of regeneration, and have received the forgiveness of all sin. Then is the time to escape all future sin, when all past sin is blotted out. And if this escape be lawfully secured by suicide, why not then specially? Why does any baptized person hold his hand from taking his own life? Why does any person who is freed from the hazards of this life again expose himself to them, when he has power so easily to rid himself of them all, and when it is written, "He who loveth danger shall fall into it?" Why

does he love, or at least face, so many serious dangers, by remaining in this life from which he may legitimately depart? But is any one so blinded and twisted in his moral nature, and so far astray from the truth, as to think that, though a man ought to make away with himself for fear of being led into sin by the oppression of one man, his master, he ought yet to live, and so expose himself to the hourly temptations of this world, both to all those evils which the oppression of one master involves, and to numberless other miseries in which this life inevitably implicates us? What reason, then, is there for our consuming time in those exhortations by which we seek to animate the baptized, either to virginal chastity, or vidual [widowed] continence, or matrimonial fidelity, when we have so much more simple and compendious a method of deliverance from sin, by persuading those who are fresh from baptism to put an end to their lives, and so pass to their Lord pure and well-conditioned? If any one thinks that such persuasion should be attempted, I say not he is foolish, but mad. With what face, then, can he say to any man, "Kill yourself, lest to your small sins you add a heinous sin, while you live under an unchaste master, whose conduct is that of a barbarian?" How can he say this, if he cannot without wickedness say, "Kill yourself, now that you are washed from all your sins, lest you fall again into similar or even aggravated sins, while you live in a world which has such power to allure by its unclean pleasures, to torment by its horrible cruelties, to overcome by its errors and terrors?" It is wicked to say this; it is therefore wicked to kill oneself. For if there could be any just cause of suicide, this were so. And since not even this is so, there is none.

from ON FREE CHOICE OF THE WILL

. . . Someone might say, "I would rather not exist at all than be unhappy." I would reply, "You're lying. You're unhappy now, and the only reason you don't want to die is to go on existing. You don't want to be unhappy, but you do want to exist. Give thanks, therefore, for what you are willingly, so that what you are against your will might be taken away; for you willingly exist, but you are unhappy against your will. If you are ungrateful for what you will to be, you are justly compelled to be what you do not will. So I praise the goodness of your Creator, for even though you are ungrateful you have what you will; and I praise the justice of your Lawgiver, for because you are ungrateful you suffer what you do not will."

But then he might say, "It is not because I would rather be unhappy than not exist at all that I am unwilling to die; it's because I'm afraid that I might be even more unhappy after death." I would reply, "If it is unjust for you to be even more unhappy, you won't be so; but if it is just, let us praise him by whose laws you will be so."

Next he might ask, "Why should I assume that if it is unjust I won't be more unhappy?" I would reply, "If at that time you will be governing yourself unjustly, in which case you will deserve your unhappiness. But suppose instead that you wish to govern yourself justly but cannot. That means that you are not in your own power, so either someone else has power over you, or no one has. If no one has power over you, you will act either willingly or unwillingly. It cannot be unwillingly, because nothing happens to you unwillingly unless you are overcome by some force, and you cannot be overcome by any force if no one has power over you. And if it is

willingly, you are in fact in your own power, and the earlier argument applies: either you deserve your unhappiness for governing yourself unjustly, or, since you have whatever you will, you have reason to give thanks for the goodness of your Creator. . . ."

. . . Then he might say, "The only reason that I will to be unhappy rather than not to exist at all is that I already exist; if somehow I could have been consulted on this matter before I existed, I would have chosen not to exist rather than to be unhappy. The fact that I am now afraid not to exist, even though I am unhappy, is itself part of that very unhappiness because of which I do not will what I ought to will. For I ought to will not to exist rather than to be unhappy. And yet I admit that in fact I would rather be unhappy than be nothing. But the more unhappy I am, the more foolish I am to will this; and the more truly I see that I ought not will this, the more unhappy I am."

I would reply, "Be careful that you are not mistaken when you think you see the truth. For if you were happy, you would certainly prefer existence to nonexistence. Even as it is, although you are unhappy and do not will to be unhappy, you would rather exist and be unhappy than not exist at all. Consider, then, as well as you can, how great is the good of existence, which the happy and the unhappy alike will. . . . The more you love existence, the more you will desire eternal life, and so the more you will long to be refashioned so that your affections are no longer temporal, branded upon you by the love of temporal things that are nothing before they exist, and then, once they do exist, flee from existence until they exist no more. . . .

. . . do not grieve that you would rather exist and be unhappy than not exist and be nothing at all. Instead, rejoice greatly, for your will to exist is like a first step. If you go on from there to set your sights more and more on existence, you will rise to him who exists in the highest degree. Thus you will keep yourself from the kind of fall in which that which exists in the lowest degree ceases to exist and thereby devastates the one who loves it. Hence, someone who prefers not to exist rather than to be unhappy has no choice but to be unhappy, since he cannot fail to exist; but someone who loves existence more than he hates being unhappy can banish what he hates by cleaving more and more to what he loves. For someone who has come to enjoy an existence that is perfect for a thing of his kind cannot be unhappy.

Notice how absurd and illogical it would be to say "I would prefer not to exist rather than to be unhappy." For someone who says "I would prefer this rather than that" is choosing. But not to exist is not something, but nothing. Therefore, you can't properly choose it, since what you are choosing does not exist. . . .

Furthermore, if someone is right in choosing to pursue something, it must be the case that he becomes better when he attains it. But whoever does not exist cannot be better, and so no one can be right in choosing not to exist. We should not be swayed by the judgment of those whose unhappiness has driven them to suicide. Either they thought that they would be better off after death, in which case they were doing nothing contrary to our argument (whether they were right in thinking so or not); or else they thought that they would be nothing after death, in which case there is even less reason for us to bother with them, since they falsely chose nothing. For how am I supposed to concur in the choice of someone who, if I asked him what he was choosing, would say "Nothing"? And someone who chooses not to exist is clearly choosing nothing, even if he won't admit it.

To tell you quite frankly what I think about this whole issue, it seems to me that someone who kills himself or in some way wants to die has the feeling that he will not exist after death, whatever his conscious opinion may be. . . . It often happens that right opinion corrects perverted

habits and that perverted opinion distorts an upright nature, so great is the power of the dominion and rule of reason. Therefore, someone who believes that after death he will not exist is driven by his unbearable troubles to desire death with all his heart; he chooses death and takes hold of it. His opinion is completely false, but his feeling is simply a natural desire for peace. And something that has peace is not nothing; indeed, it is greater than something that is restless. For restlessness generates one conflicting passion after another, whereas peace has the constancy that is the most conspicuous characteristic of Being.

So the will's desire for death is not a desire for nonexistence but a desire for peace. When someone wrongly believes that he will not exist, he desires by nature to be at peace; that is, he desires to exist in a higher degree. Therefore, just as no one can desire not to exist, no one ought to be ungrateful to the goodness of the Creator for the fact that he exists. . . .

THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD (3rd–6th century)

Bava Kamma 91b
Avodah Zarah 18a
Gittin 57b
Semahot 2:1–2

The Babylonian Talmud, *the most comprehensive body of rabbinic literature and a central text of Jewish civil and religious law, dates from the 2nd century* B.C. *to its final redaction during the 5th and 6th centuries* A.D.. *Talmudic literature, including the* Mishnah, *the Babylonian and Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmuds, and the various midrashic commentaries on the Hebrew Bible [q.v.] including* Genesis Rabbah *[q.v.], provides the classical, canonical statement of rabbinic Judaism.*

The Mishnah, *the oldest text of the talmudic literature, is a codification of laws derived from an oral tradition. These legal and folkloric teachings, normative statements, and anecdotes relating to rabbinic practice and instruction developed over a period that began several centuries before the Christian era. In the 3rd century* A.D., *Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi compiled the existing traditions and gave them the fixed form now known as the* Mishnah. *The word "*mishnah*" is a noun formed from the verb "*shannah*," which means "to repeat" or "to learn," specifically indicating an education derived orally through continual recitation. The* Mishnah *is the foundation of both Talmuds.*

The Palestinian Talmud, also called the Jerusalem Talmud, contains both the Mishnah *and a commentary on the* Mishnah *called the* Gemara. *This Talmud was collected and written by Palestinian scholars from the 3rd century* A.D. *to the 5th century* A.D. *The Babylonian Talmud includes both the* Mishnah *and its own* Gemara *written mostly in Aramaic, different from the commentaries found in the Palestinian Talmud. The contents of the Babylonian Talmud were collected and composed by scholars in the 3rd century* A.D. *through the 6th century. While the two Gemaras partially overlap, the Babylonian Talmud is generally more extensive and its discussions are more fully developed; within the later Jewish tradition, it is considered the authoritative Talmud.*

Several selections from the Babylonian Talmud are included in this volume. The first is from Bava Kamma ("First Gate"), a treatise of the order Nezikin ("Injuries") *on compensation for damages it cites disagreement among the Tanaim, scholars of the period of the Mishna (sing. Tana). This text again cites the same midrash regarding suicide, though in somewhat different form, that had been earlier "creatively" developed in* Genesis Rabbah. *It confirms the prohibition of suicide midrashically derived from Genesis 9:5, and explores both sides of the issue of whether a person is allowed to harm himself or herself. Clearly, some early sources in the Jewish tradition appear to allow self-harm (see the selections from the Hebrew Bible [q.v.]); the Talmud here seems to labor to find a clear source for a more restrictive view. As is common in talmudic discussions, this remains an unresolved issue.*

The second inclusion from the Babylonian Talmud is found in Avodah Zarah ("Idolatrous Worship"), also of the order Nezikin, a treatise on the laws regulating the conduct of the Jews toward other forms of worship and practices regarded as idolatry. In this selection, Chanina ben Tradyon, a rabbi and teacher, is condemned to die by the Romans for continuing to teach Jewish law. Initially, when his students suggest hastening his death, R. Chanina refuses their offer and affirms the general prohibition of suicide by appealing to the idea that God alone has sovereign power over all life. Then, in a seeming contradiction, he agrees to have the executioner bring about his death quickly and promises the executioner—a pagan—eternal life in exchange for helping him. The executioner increases the flame, precipitating R. Chanina's death, and then promptly leaps into the fire himself. A heavenly voice approves of the actions of both men, saying, "R. Chanina b. Tradyon and his executioner are invited to the world to come."

The third and fourth selections from the Babylonian Talmud come from the treatise Gittin ("Documents") of the order Nashim ("Women"). *Both excerpts offer examples of suicide during times of persecution, in one case to escape sexual slavery, and in the other as a response to severe grief. The first example, from the aftermath of the failed Jewish rebellion against Rome, describes the suicides of 400 boys and girls who were intended for use as prostitutes. Responding to a question by one of the girls, the eldest boy cites a verse from Psalms to show that they would be brought into the world to come if they jumped into the sea. Each group then throws themselves into the water. This selection raises several important questions about the relationship between suicide and martyrdom, including whether actively committing suicide to escape an evil like forced prostitution is morally distinct from allowing oneself to be killed, as in the biblical account of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, or Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, and why the suicide of the boys and girls is acceptable when it was inappropriate, at least initially, for R. Chanina to hasten his death to escape the torture of immolation.*

The Gittin also depicts the suicide of a woman whose children allowed themselves to be martyred to avoid the sin of idolatry. The woman, who was not a martyr like her children, is nevertheless represented as an example of an appropriate an appropriate example of suicide: she throws herself from a roof and then "rejoices with her sons" in the afterlife. No explanation is given for the licitness of the woman's death, although it is possible that her suicide was excusable in her unique circumstances because of extreme grief.

The final inclusion from the Babylonian Talmud is in Semahot ("Joys," a circumlocution for mourning), a later treatise that is placed after the order Nezikin in more recent editions of the Talmud; it deals with mourning for the dead. Semahot is a post-talmudic composition that arrived at its present form in the 8th century A.D.*; it is included here because it undoubtedly contains earlier material. The selection describes what is to be done in terms of rites and mourning for a person who has committed suicide. However, the passage ensures that few deaths will be classified as suicide by holding that one*

may be treated as a suicide only if witnesses can testify that the deceased expressed clear intent and acted immediately following the expression of intent. (This requirement presumably incorporates the usual rules requiring two reliable witnesses who are independently cross-examined and excluding circumstantial evidence.) This attempt at defining suicide opened a subsequent debate within Judaism spanning several centuries and comprising an enormous body of rabbinic literature.

Source

Babylonian Talmud: Bava Kamma 91b, Abodah Zarah 18a, Gittin 57b, Semahot 2:1–2, tr. Baruch Brody. Comment in introduction from Noam Zohar.

from THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Bava Kamma 91b

There is a disagreement among the Tanaim, for some say that a person is not allowed to harm himself while others say that he is. Which Tana says that a person is not allowed to harm himself?

Is it the Tana who taught: "But your blood from yourself I will seek punishment [Genesis 9:5]"? R. Elazar says, from you yourself I will seek punishment for your blood. Perhaps self-killing is different. . . .

It is the Tana who taught: R. Elazar Hakfar said, what do we learn from the verse [about the Nazirite] which says, "it will redeem him from the sin that he sinned in himself?" What is his sin? He denied himself wine. We can argue *a fortiori*. If this person who just denied himself wine is considered a sinner, then the person who more fully harmed himself is certainly considered a sinner.

Avodah Zarah 18a

They took him [Chanina b. Tradyon], wrapped a Scroll of the Law around him, and placed bundles of branches around him, which they set on fire. They brought wool soaked in water and placed it on his heart so that he could not die quickly. . . . His students said to him, "Open your mouth and let the flame enter [so that you will die]." He said to them, "It is better that [life] should be taken by He who gave it and a person should not harm himself." The executioner said to him, "Rabbi, if I increase the fire and take the wool from your heart, will you bring me to the world to come?" He said, "Yes." "Swear that to me." He did. Immediately he [the executioner] increased the flame and took the wool from his heart, and he died. He [the executioner] jumped into the fire. A Heavenly Voice said, "R. Chanina b. Tradyon and his executioner are invited to the world to come."

Gittin 57b

It happened that 400 boys and girls had been taken captive to be used as prostitutes. They realized for what they were wanted. They asked, "If we drown in the sea, will we enter the world to

come?" The eldest taught, "I will bring from the depths of the sea (Ps. 68:22); these are those who drown in the sea." When the girls heard this, they all jumped into the sea. The boys argued *a fortiori* about themselves. "If these for whom it [the intended sexual act] is natural did this, we, for whom it [the intended sexual act] is not natural should certainly do so." They also jumped into the sea. . . .

The mother [of the seven martyrs] said to them, "Give him to me so that I may kiss him a little." She said to him, "My son, go and say to Abraham your father, you sacrificed on one altar and I sacrificed on seven altars." She went up to the roof and fell and died. A Heavenly Voice came and said, "The mother of the sons rejoices."

Semahot 2:1-2

If someone commits suicide, we do not perform any rites over him. R. Yishmael says, "We say over him, Woe! He has taken his life." R. Akiva says, "Leave him in silence. Neither honor him nor curse him. We do not rend any garments over him, do not take off any shoes, do not eulogize him. But we do line up for the mourners, and we do bless them because this honors the living. The rule is: we do whatever honors the living. . . ."

Who is someone who has committed suicide? It is not the person who has gone up to the top of the tree and fallen or the person who has gone up to the top of the roof and fallen. It is the person who says "I will go to the top of the roof or the top of the tree and throw myself down and kill myself" and we see him do just that. This is the person about whom we presume he has committed suicide.

BANA
(c. 595–c. 655)

from *Harsha-Carita, The Death of the Great King: On Sati* (in Archive only)
from *Kadambari*

Bana, also known as Banabhatta, a Sanskrit author and poet, was born in the latter part of the 6th century in Brahmanadhivasa, or Pritikuta, northern India, into a Brahmin family. Bana's mother died when he was a child, and his father died when Bana was 14; afterward, he led a nomadic life for many years. He maintained his ancestral fortune, but traveled because of an innate curiosity and desire to explore; according to his own account, he became a figure of derision among his people because of his unorthodox wanderings. When he returned to his native Pritikuta, he was summoned by the emperor Harsha to appear at the royal court. "Emperor Harsha's ears have been poisoned against you by some wicked people," warned a message conveyed to him on his return. In spite of his fears about the hostile

reception that might be awaiting him, Bana found favor with the emperor and was asked to write a history of Harsha's life—which, according to his own account, he began the next morning.

The resulting work, the Harsha-Carita (Deeds of Harsha), *written in the lofty kavya style of Sanskrit, chronicles the history of this emperor, the famous Harshavardhana (c. 590–647). Harsha gained territory in a brilliant career of conquest and eventually ruled the whole of northern India; his reign lasted from about 606 to 647. Harsha was the last Hindu emperor of northern India; a Chinese Buddhist traveler, Hiuen Tsang, who resided at Harsha's court from about 630 to 644, says that toward the end of his career, Harsha became a devout Buddhist and held a great assembly every five years in which he emptied his treasury to give all away in charity. Bana's commissioned portrayal of Harsha is best described as a historical romance, in which he takes his own sovereign as his hero and weaves the story out of the events of Harsha's reign. Bana's other works include lyric poetry, prose, drama, romances, and a poetic novel that is the history of his own family, the unfinished* Kadambari, *later completed by his son. The second selection here is from this latter work. Bana's works earned him a reputation as one of the most talented Sanskrit poets in Indian history.*

The selection from the Harsha-Carita *is a complex portrayal of the Hindu practice of* sati *(literally, "virtuous woman"), or* anumarana *(from the Sanskrit verb* anu-mri, *"to follow in death"). In* sati, *or widow-burning, a wife who has just been widowed immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre as he is being cremated. The custom of concremation had been described in northern India before the Gupta Empire; it may have developed from funeral practices involving the voluntary deaths of retainers and others loyal to the deceased, or evolved from Vedic and sutra-period expectations that the widow lead an ascetic life and marry her dead husband's younger brother or other kinsman.* Sati *developed particularly in the higher castes in northern India from the 5th through the 10th centuries, and became the subject of considerable controversy in the 19th century in Bengal [q.v., under Rammohun Roy and under Hindu Widow]. Although often infrequent and, it is claimed, for the most part (though not always) voluntary,* sati *was practiced throughout India until it was banned by the Bengal Presidency in 1828 and the ban upheld by the British Privy Council in 1832.*

By the time of Bana, in the 7th century A.D., sati *had come to be regarded as an act of the greatest spiritual merit: The woman who died on her husband's funeral pyre was known as a* sati, *a "virtuous woman," a term also applied to the act itself. In Bana's account in the* Harsha-Carita, *a queen explains to her son why she is resolved to follow the custom of* sati—*atypically, even though her husband, the emperor, is not yet dead, and even though her son begs her not to kill herself. It also describes the suicides of other queens and the emperor's retainers, once he has died. The passage is important for the insight it gives into Hinduism's conceptualization of* sati *and related practices, and the sense in which these practices, though socially expected, were also understood as both voluntary and caused by overwhelming grief. Bana himself, however, was perhaps the first opponent of the practice of* sati *and an extremely strong one. The second very brief selection, from his novel* Kadambari, *gives his reasons for his opposition. He denounces the practice as "stumbling through stupidity."*

Sources

The Harsha-Carita of Bana, ch. V, trs. E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas [1897], Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961, pp. 151–155. Quotations in introductory passage, pp. xi, xlviii. Available online at www.mssu/edu/projectsouthasia/ from the Project South Asia; Bana, *Kadambari*, ed. Kashinath Pandurang Parab. Nirnaysagar Press, 1890, purva-bhag, p. 339.

from HARSHA-CARITA, THE DEATH OF THE GREAT KING: ON SATI

Thus:—first the earth, heaving in all her circle of great hills, moved as though she would go with her lord. Next the oceans, as though remembering Dhanvantari, rolled with waves noisily plashing upon each other. High in the heavenly spaces, apprehensive of the king's removal, appeared comets like braided locks with awful curls of far-extended flame. Beneath a sky thus lowering with comets the world seemed grey, as with the smoke of a Long Life sacrifice commenced by the sky regents. In the sun's circle, now shorn of its radiance and lurid as a bowl of heated iron, some power, studious of the king's life, had presented a human offering in the guise of a horrid headless trunk. The lord of white effulgence, gleaming 'mid the round rim of his flaming halo, seemed to have raised a rampart of fire in alarm at Rahu's greedily opening jaws. The quarters, won by the king's valour, glowed red as though they had in anticipation entered fire. All crimsoned with flowing showers of bloody dew, the earth, his spouse, appeared to have shrouded herself in a gown of red cloth to die with him. . . .

. . . Distressed by these mighty signs, the prince could scarce live through that night. On the morrow a woman approached from the palace with such a tinkle of ornaments breaking in her hurried advance that she seemed a proclamation of the victory of dismay. The clash of her anklets, as they moved on her hurrying feet, set the craning *hamsas* of the palace cackling, as if from a (respectful) distance they were asking 'What? What?' . . . Hanging over her sloping shoulders, tossed by the wind, and black as strips of *Tamala* bark, her hair covered her bosom in a dangling unbraided mass in keeping with her grief. As she incessantly waved her hand, which through the pain of beating her breasts was swollen and dark almost like copper in the palm, one might have thought it scorched through wiping away her hot tears. The people near her, imaged in her cheek, she seemed to bathe in her eyes' broken cascade, as if they were soon to enter the fire of sorrow. Under the quivering rays that issued from her restless eyes the very day grew black, as if burnt by her grief. It was Vela, Yashovati's head attendant, inquiring of everyone where the prince was. Welcomed by the people's despairing looks, she drew near, and letting both hands fall upon the mosaic, so that as she bent her head the rays from her teeth seemed to besprinkle her pallid lips in a falling shower, 'Help, help, my lord,' she cried; 'though her husband lives, the queen has taken a certain resolution.'

At the news of this further grief the prince, as if his strength of mind had given way, as if melted by sorrow, drained by thought, carried off his feet by pain, clasped by alarm to her bosom, lost all power of action. With returning consciousness, 'Callous that I am,' he thought, 'the assault of grief, oft as it falls upon my heart, yet like a hammer's stroke upon hard flint, evokes fire indeed, but reduces not my frame to ashes.' Rising, he went in haste to the women's apartments, where while still at a distance he heard cries like these from queens resolved to die:—'Beloved Mango, take thought to yourself, your mother is seeking another home—I am going, darling jasmine cluster, bid me farewell—Without me, sister pomegranate by the house, you are now to be defenceless—Forgive, red *Ashoka*, my kicks and sins in plucking your sprays for ear-ornaments—I see you, seraglio *Vakula*, wayward child as you are become through those mouthfuls of wine—Clasp me tight, dear *Priyangu* creeper; I am passing beyond your reach—Friend Mango at the porch, you must render me the funeral libation of

water, since you are my child—See you forget me not, brother parrot in your cage! What say you? I am taken away from you—May we meet again, *Sharika*, in dreams—Mother, to whom shall I entrust the tame peacock who clings in my path?—Nurse, you must fondle this pair of *hamsas* like children—Ah hapless me! not to have enjoyed the marriage festivities of this couple of ruddy-geese—Go back, fawn deer, mother's darling—Chamberlain, fetch my favourite lute, I must embrace it—Take a good look at me, Candraseni —Vindumati, this is my last greeting— Let go my feet, girl—Venerable old widow friend, why do you weep? I am in the hand of fate—Chamberlain, old friend, why pass respectfully round an unlucky woman like me?—Control yourself, foster sister, why do you fall at my feet?—Clasp me by the neck, sister, for the last time—Cruel, I have not seen my dear friend Malayavati—This humble greeting, Kurangavati, is for goodbye—Sanumati, this is my last obeisance—This, Kuvalayavati, is our final embrace—Pardon, friends, our lovers' quarrels.'

Entering with these sounds burning in his ears, he saw his mother just issuing forth, after giving away all her wealth and assuming the vestments of death, with the purpose of entering the fire, like Sita, before her lord. Still wet from her recent bath, she resembled the holy Sri just risen from the ocean. Like the sky with its double twilight tints, she wore two saffron-brown robes. Enveloping her form, like a silken shawl, she wore the tokens of her unwidowed death, reddened by a tissue of light from lips stained with the deep dye of betel. Hanging between her breasts was a red neck cord, suggesting a stream of blood pouring from a broken heart. Her necklace, the thread of which was drawn aside by the hooked point of a cross-bent earring, seemed a halter of white silk compressing her throat. Her limbs being all aglow with moist saffron paste, she appeared to be swallowed in the pyre's devouring flames, while she filled the bosom of her robe with white tears like flower offerings to its blaze. At every step she scattered in dropping bracelets a kind of farewell present to the family goddesses. From her neck down to her instep hung wreaths of strung flowers, as if she were mounted on a death-swing with garlands for cords.

An ear-lotus resonant with bees humming within seemed to be saluting her lotus eyes. The domestic *hamsas*, lovers of her jewelled anklets, moved in a circle round her, as if to make the ceremonial circuit. Her hand carried a picture representing her husband, which she held as steadfast as her heart, where he dwelt, was fixed on death. Lovingly, like a pennon of wifely love, she clasped her lord's spear-haft, reverently tied with waving strings of white flowers. Before the king's Umbrella, spotless as her life, she shed tears as to a kinsman.

She was giving instructions to her husband's ministers, who grasped them with difficulty, their eyes being stopped by torrents of tears that welled up as they fell at her feet. Her ears caught the sound of wailing in the house, where a group of old kinsmen, grieving at their courteous dismissal, were adding to the clamour. The roars of the caged lions took her heart captive, resembling, as they did, her husband's utterance. Her nurse and her conjugal love had combined to beautify her: an old woman and swooning, familiar both, supported her: a friend and agony, comrades in adversity, embraced her: servants and pain were about her, clasping every limb: great princes and sighs attended her: behind came aged chamberlains and heavy griefs. Even upon her husband's favourite hounds she cast a tearful eye: she fell at the feet even of rival queens: to even the painted figures she offered greeting: before even the domestic birds she clasped her hands: to the very brutes she said farewell: she embraced the very trees about the palace.

'Mother,' cried the prince while still afar, his eyes filling with tears,'do you also abandon hapless me? Be merciful and turn back,' and so in the act of speaking fell at her feet till his crest was

almost lovingly kissed by the light of her jewelled anklets. As he lay there with his head touching her feet, her youngest and dearest son in such distraction of mind, the queen Yashovati, propped up by a great frenzy of grief like a mountain, carried away into the Tartarean darkness of a swoon, overborne by the full tide of love rising in might like an outburst of accumulated tears long pent up, could not in spite of all her efforts check the torrent of her weeping. . . .

Then, as her thought recurred to home and kin, full oft she moaned, calling aloud upon her parents, 'Mother! Father! look not upon me as a sinner that in my sore affliction I have set out for the other world': crying to her dear elder son far away, 'Alas darling! that I, all ill-fated, see you not': lamenting her daughter, now settled in her father-in-law's house, 'Defenceless are you now': reproaching, fate, 'Merciless power, how have I offended?': inveighing in various ways against herself, 'No woman has had such an evil portion as I': suddenly reviling death, 'Remorseless one, thou hast stolen me away!'

When this outburst of grief had died away, she lovingly raised her son, and with her hand wiped his streaming eyes, . . . stood for some time with her eyes fixed immoveably upon her son's face, and then after many long sighs spoke.

'It is not, dear, that you are unloved, without noble qualities, or deserving to be abandoned. With my very bosom's milk you drank up my heart. If at this hour my regard is not towards you, 'tis that my lord's great condescension comes between us. Furthermore, dear son, I am not, like glory or the earth, incompassionate, a requisite of sovereignty, ever craving for the sight of another lord. I am the lady of a great house, born of a stainless ancestry, one whose virtue is her dower. Have you forgotten that I am the lioness mate of a great spirit, who like a lion had his delight in a hundred battles? Daughter, spouse, mother of heroes, how otherwise could such a woman as I, whose price was valour, act? This hand has been clasped by even such a hero, thy father, a chief among princes, peer of Bharata, Bhagiratha, and Nabhaga. Upon this head have the subservient wives of countless feudatories poured coronation water from golden ewers. This forehead, in winning the honourable fillet of chief-queen, has enjoyed a thing scarce accessible to desire. These breasts have worn robes swayed by the wind of chowries waved by captive wives of foes; they have been sucked by sons like you. Upon the heads of rival wives have these feet been set; they have been adored with diamond-wreaths of diadems by the bending matrons of a whole capital. Thus every limb has fulfilled its mission: I have spent my store of good works, what more should I look to? I would die while still unwidowed. I cannot endure, like the widowed Rati, to make unavailing lamentations for a burnt husband. Going before, like the dust of your father's feet, to announce his coming to the heavens, I shall be high esteemed of the hero-loving spouses of the gods. Nay, what will the smoke-bannered one burn of me, who am already on fire with the recent sight of his heart-rending pains? Not to die, but to live at such a time would be unfeeling. Compared with the flame of wifely sorrow, whose fuel is imperishable love, fire itself is chilly cold. How suits it to be parsimonious of a life light as a bit of rotten straw, when that life's lord, majestic as Kailasa, is passing away? Even should I live, yet after the mortal sin of slighting the king's death the joys, my son, of my son's rule will touch me not. In those that are consumed by grief felicity is ominous, accursed, and unavailing. Not in the body, dear son, but in the glory of loyal widows would I abide on earth. Therefore dishonour me no more, I beseech you, beloved son, with opposition to my heart's desire.'

So saying she fell at his feet. But the prince hastily drew them away, and bending down, held her in both his arms, and raised her prostrate form. Pondering the inevitableness of grief,

deeming that act to be the better part befitting a lady of rank, recognizing her fixed resolution, he stood in silence with downcast looks.

True is it that, even when made timorous by affection, a noble nature resigns itself to what accords with place and time. Having embraced her son and kissed his head, the queen went forth on foot from the women's quarter, and, though the heavens, filled with the citizens' lamentations, seemed to block her path, proceeded to the Sarasvati's banks. Then, having worshipped the fire with the blooming red lotus posies of a woman's timorous glances, she plunged into it, as the moon's form enters the adorable sun. The other, distracted at his mother's death, departed 'mid a throng of kinsmen to his father's side, and found him with his vital forces nearly spent, revolving his eyeballs as the declining lord of stars (the Moon) revolves his stars. Overcome with excess of intolerable grief, robbed by affection of all self-control, he clasped those lotus feet which had been fondled by the assembled crests of all proud kings; and uttering a cry, burst like a common man into a long fit of weeping, raining from clouded eyes a most pellucid stream of tears. It seemed as if an inner fire were melting his moonlike face, the light-texture of his teeth turning to water, the loveliness of his eyes oozing out, the ambrosia of his countenance trickling away.

The king, whose eyes were closing, recovering consciousness as the sound of the prince's ceaseless weeping fell upon his ear, uttered in faint tones these words:—"You should not be so, my son. Men of your mould are not infirm of heart. Strength of soul is the people's mainstay, and second to it is royal blood. With you, the vanguard of the stout-hearted, the abode of all preeminence, what has weakness to do? To say you are the lamp of our line were almost depreciation of one whose brilliance compares with the god of day. To call you a lion among heroes is like a reproach to one whose prowess is seconded by penetrating insight. To declare this earth yours is almost a vain repetition, when your bodily marks proclaim an universal emperor's dignity. To bid you take to yourself glory is almost contradictory, when glory has herself adopted you. 'Succeed to this world' is a command too mean for an intending conqueror of both worlds. 'Appropriate my treasury' is a grant of little service to one whose sole craving is for the accumulation of fame spotless as moonlight. 'Make prize of the feudatory kings' is almost meaningless, when your virtues have made prize of all beings. 'Support the burden of royalty' is an injunction misbecoming one accustomed to support the burden of the three worlds. 'Protect the people' is but reiteration, when the sky has your long arm for its bar. 'Guard well your dependents' is an incidental duty to a peer of the world's Guardians. 'Practise yourself in arms,' to one whose forearm is blackened by the bow-string's callous brand how can this advice be given? 'Check levity' is an utterance without excuse towards one whose senses even in tender years were held in check. 'Annihilate your foes' is a suggestion of your own inborn valour."

With these words on his lips the lion king closed his eyes never to open them more.

In that hour the sun too was reft of the brilliance which was *his* life. Ashamed as it were of his own sinfulness involved in the taking of the king's life, he now bent low his face. As if scorched within by a fire of sorrow for the monarch's decease, he assumed a coppery hue. Slowly, slowly he descended from the heavens, as if in compliance with earthly usage to pay a visit of condolence. As though to present an oblation of water to the king, he drew nigh to the western ocean. As soon as the water was presented, his thousand hands became red as if burnt in sorrow's flame.

With radiance thus subdued, as if the mighty emperor's death had brought on a deep distaste for life and colour, the light-coroneted god entered the hollows of the mountain caves. . . . . At that hour the feudatories and townsmen headed by the family priest, taking upon proffered shoulders the bier of this Shivi-like king, bore him to the river Sarasvati, and there upon a pyre

befitting an emperor solemnly consumed all but his glory in the flames. As for my lord Harsha, through all that night, terrible as Bhimarathi, he sat with the princes sleepless on the uncushioned ground, surrounded by all the connections of the royal household in a dumb sorrowing company like an universal assemblage of living beings; while his tears rained down like an outpouring of the flood of affection which, heated by sorrow's fire, flowed only within. In his heart be thought:—'Now that my father is taken away, the world of the living has reached its goal: a chasm sunders the progress of mankind; the eldorados of desire are laid desolate, veiled are the portals of joy. . . .'

. . . the moon dropped upon the verge of the western ocean's sand isle. Gradually his light paled, as if through the smoke which spread from the king's flaming pyre; in his heart appeared a blackness as of a dark scar due to his burning sorrow for the king: chastened in mien as it were by the agony depicted in the moon-like faces of the departed monarch's whole harem, and distracted with yearning for his already vanished Rohini, he drew nigh to his setting. Like my lord the king, the sun had mounted the heavens, and like the sovereignty, the course of night had changed.

. . . On the same day the king's favourite servants, friends, and ministers, whose hearts were held tight by the bonds of his many virtues, went forth, and in spite of the remonstrances of tearful friends, abandoned their loved wives and children. Some consigned themselves to precipices: some stationed themselves at holy fords in the neighbourbood. Some in agony of heart spread couches of grass, and quieted their great sorrow by abstinence from food: some, beside themselves with passionate grief, plunged like moths into the flame. Some, in whose hearts burnt a fire of fierce pain, took vows of silence and sought refuge on the mount of snows: some to cool their heat lay on couches of twigs along the Vindhya slopes, where wild elephants bedewed their bodies with a shower bath from their trunks. Some, indisposed for a courtier's life, abandoned the gratifications within their reach, and lived on a limited diet in vacant forest openings: some by feeding on air became emaciated hermits, rich only in virtue. Some assumed red robes and studied the system of Kapila in the mountains: some, tearing off their crest jewels, bound the ascetic's knot upon their heads, and made Shiva their refuge: others by enveloping themselves in trailing pale-red rags displayed the bright afterglow of their love. Others again reached old age in sylvan hermitages, where the deer licked their forms with the ends of their tongues: others finally took vows, and roamed as shaven monks, bearing water in pots and in the hollows of their eyes, both equally red in colour and rubbed by their hands.

My lord Harsha's condition underwent no change. Wild with grief for his father, he turned away from all the avocations of life . . ., regarding glory as a curse, the earth a mortal sin, royalty a disease, pleasures serpents, home a hell, family ties a bondage, life an infamy, the body an infliction, health a blot, vigour a result of sin, food a poison, poison ambrosia, sandal a flame, love a saw, heartbreak a felicity. He was closely attended by young nobles of ancient houses, which had enjoyed the favour of the court for generations, venerable trusted advisers wearing an inherited dignity, old Brahmans versed in Shruti, Smriti and Itihasa, anointed counsellors of royal rank endowed with learning, birth and character, approved ascetics well trained in the doctrine of the Self, sages indifferent to pain and pleasure, Vedantists skilled in expounding the nothingness of the fleeting world, mythologists expert in allaying sorrow. Under their influence the prince was never allowed even in thought to follow the dictates of grief, and through their solicitations he gradually lost his distaste for food and the other dues of life. . . .

from KADAMBARI

This practice which is called *Anumarana* is utterly fruitless. This is a path followed by the illiterate, this is manifestation of infatuation, this is a course of ignorance, this is an art of foolhardiness, this is short-sightedness, this is stumbling through stupidity, viz. that life is put an end to when a parent, brother, friend, or husband is dead. Life should not be ended, if it does not leave one of itself. . . .

THE QURAN
(traditional date c. 632–c. 650)

Surahs 2.54, 2.154, 2.195, 2.207, 3.145, 3.169–70, 4.29–30, 4.66, 4.74–80, 9.111, 18.6

The Quran (meaning "recital" in Arabic) is the sacred scripture of Islam, and Muslims believe that it is the direct word of God given through the archangel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad over a period of about 23 years, from 610 until 632.

The traditional biographies (the sira *literature) of Muhammad's (c. 570–632) life holds that he was born in Mecca to a poor but respected clan, Hashim, within the powerful and influential tribe of Quraish, and that he was orphaned by the age of six and raised by his uncle. Muhammad is said to have displayed an acute moral sensitivity at an early age. He later impressed a rich widow, Khadija, with his honesty and ability in managing her caravan business, and so she offered him marriage, which he accepted at the age of 25. They had six children, of whom only one daughter survived. Muhammad is said to have experienced his first revelation in about 610 while on retreat in a cave on Mount Hira outside Mecca. Hostilities were raised against him because of his preaching against the polytheism of the Meccans, and in 622, he led his people on the flight known as the* hijra *from Mecca to Medina. His armies attacked Mecca and repulsed a retaliatory siege; he eliminated his internal enemies, including all of the men in one of three Jewish clans in Medina, and forced the Meccans to surrender. According to tradition, Muhammad eventually became the most powerful leader in western Arabia and enforced the principles of Islam, giving unbelievers the choice between the sword and the* Quran. *He granted Jews and Christians comparative autonomy as "peoples of the Book," whose revelations and prophets—Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ—he saw as anticipating himself. Muhammad's social teachings emphasized economic justice and improving the situation of women, slaves, orphans, and the poor.*

The traditional accounts of Muhammad's life are largely gleaned from the Prophet biographies, the sira*, and the "sayings" of Muhammad or* hadith *[q.v.]. Muhammad preached what can be called an Abrahamic monotheism at the time of the Roman-Persian wars (603–630), a monotheism that Christians and Jews, among others, had interpreted according to their respective apocalyptic traditions. The developed tradition of Islam as it is known today is the work of religious scholars attempting to*

establish a viable, standardized form of written Arabic, living in the sophisticated, cosmopolitan Iraq of the 800s and 900s—a period during which wine poetry, Greek philosophy, and the Sassanian royal cult were freely celebrated, and in which foreigners had arrived from lands subject to the Conquest—projecting, in the view of some scholars, a utopian religious community back into the earlier deserts of Arabia.

The Quran consists of 114 surahs or chapters of unequal length. According to tradition, secretaries and early followers of Muhammad began to collect his revelations before his death in 632, writing verses on palm leaves, bark, pieces of wood, parchment or leather, flat stones, and the shoulder blades of camels. Several hundred companions are said to have memorized the Quran by heart. Also according to modern research, the Quran was arranged and given diacritical marks definitively sometime in the mid 700s by Arabic scholars, and the final text was completed in the early 800s. The dates cited here for the Quran's composition, c. 632–c. 650, are the traditional ones. The Quran, together with the hadith, contains the central theological and political doctrines of Islam. These texts differ in that the Quran, in its original Arabic form, is believed to be the direct word of God; first-person expressions such as "We" or "Our" refer to the voice of God, and Muslims accept the Quran as divinely authoritative and beyond fallibility or criticism. In Muslim belief, the Quran was revealed by God to Muhammad in the Arabic language; translations thus introduce interpretation and the possibility of error. In distinction from the Quran, the traditions or hadith are a collection of Muhammad's sayings and actions. The hadith are understood as foundational, but they are not held to be divine revelation.

The main tenets of Islam established in the Quran hold that there is only one true God, Allah, and one true religion, Islam; that all human beings were created by Allah and belong to him; that all persons must make an accounting of their lives at a final judgment and will be rewarded with eternal happiness in a paradise among gardens and fountains, or punishment by fire in hell, predicated on their actions in this life; and that Allah sends prophets—the most important being Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—to lead all people to moral truth. The ideal of human endeavor is to "reform the earth" by leading people beyond their petty, self-interested, self-deceptive characters to altruism that involves concern for the poor, dedication to the benefit of humanity, and loyalty to the cause of Allah. In the Quranic view, resurrection and judgment are central. Death is the transition to a new life; it is willed by God, who has appointed a time for each individual to die. Repentance for sin is possible, but only immediately after the evil has been committed; deathbed repentance after a life of sin does not prevent punishment in the afterlife.

The Quran is taken to be the source of a divine proscription against self-killing, a prohibition that is not questioned or debated by most followers of Islam. Suicide is clearly forbidden in shari`ah, Islamic law. However, there is no fully explicit text in the Quran (understood as Muhammad's recitation of the word of God), which states this prohibition unambiguously, though the prohibition is fully clear in Muhammad's own sayings preserved in the hadith. Sunni or majority Islam has no central dogmatic authority; hence, the passages from the Quran presented here are those variously taken by different teachers, commentators, and scholars to pertain to the question of suicide. Several of the surahs (e.g., 2.154, 3.169–70, 2.07, 4.74, and 9.111) appear to distinguish martyrdom from suicide, although martyrs have knowingly and voluntarily sacrificed their lives; some hold that martyrs go directly to Paradise after death.

Surah 2.54 describes a rebuke from Moses to the people of Israel in which he commands them to seek forgiveness from the Creator and, in some translations, "kill yourselves" (Mawdudi), or in others,

"slay the culprits among you" (Dawood). This passage is usually interpreted as an order to righteous Israelites to put to death those of their own number who, engaging in the cult of cow-worship absorbed from the Canaanites, had made a calf (the "Golden Calf") and actually worshipped it. Some scholars read it as an exhortation to commit a form of spiritual destruction of the self by conquering the inner passions or lusts, appropriately translated "let each one of you slay the evil propensities of his mind" (Khan). Still others see the passage as referring to a different kind of "spiritual suicide," a death through severe grief or self-condemnation.

Surah *2.195, "make not your own hands contribute to (your) destruction," forms part of a mandate requiring charitable spending to help the poor. According to one interpreter, the direct meaning of the verse is that to fail to give alms to the poor will eventually mean self-destruction of the community; according to another, it holds that self-interest rather than charity in spending will lead to one's ruin both in this world and in the next: "do not push yourselves into ruin with your own hands" (Khan).*

Surah *3.145, translated as "It is not given to any soul to die except with the leave of Allah, and at an appointed time" (Mawdudi), "No one can die except by Allah's leave, that is a decree with a fixed term" (Khan), or "No one dies unless God permit. The term of every life is fixed" (Dawood), is cited by some contemporary commentators as grounds for the prohibition of suicide. However, it is not universally so cited; the passage is also understood to hold that it is not possible to hasten or escape death so that it occurs at a time earlier or later than that preordained for it by God.*

Surah *4.29 is the passage most often cited as the authoritative proscription against self-killing in Islamic scripture, "do not kill yourselves (*anfusakum*)" or "do not destroy yourselves," yet its direct meaning appears to refer to mutual killing (*anfus- *is understood as reciprocal), that is, "do not kill each other," a reading that is supported by the context. This, according to a contemporary source, is taken to assume that "a Muslim's killing another Muslim is tantamount to killing himself or herself." Surah 4.30, "If any do that . . ." can be read as either complementary to 4.29 or independent; if the former, it means that to consume one's own wealth in vanity (or to consume the property of others wrongfully) is to court one's own destruction, since this corrupts society; if the latter, it can mean either that one should not kill others or that one should not kill oneself.*

Surahs *4.66 and 4.74 may seem to condone suicide if it is committed with a worthy objective.* Surah *4.66 concerns the possibility that followers of Islam might be required to "slay yourselves" (Mawdudi) or "kill yourselves in striving for the cause of Allah" (Khan) or "lay down your lives" (Dawood), though most Quranic commentators interpret the passage as a commandment to Muslims in general to be prepared to sacrifice their lives or seek death in* jihad, *"struggle in the cause of God" or holy war, and not as an appeal to individual suicide. Similarly,* surah *4.74, about "those . . . who sell the life of this world for the hereafter," appears to raise the issue of voluntary death sought in order to reach the afterlife—a matter that had also been an issue for early Christians. Some Quranic commentators understand this passage as concerning* jihad *[q.v., under Mutahhari], not suicide.* Jihad *is the only way a Muslim can—and is expected to—take and give life.*

The third interpretation of surah *2.54, above, is related by some scholars to the final* surah, *18.6, "Thou wouldst only, perchance, fret thyself to death, following after them, in grief, if they believe not in this Message," which some scholars believe hints that Muhammad might torment himself to death through grief over disbelief among his people: "Wilt thou grieve thyself to death for sorrow over them, if they believe not in this Discourse?" (Khan). These scholars have held that on several occasions during*

the prolonged period without revelation (the "Fatra," lasting some 2½ to 3 years) that followed his early divine inspirations, Muhammad—in desperation—ascended the highest hill near Mecca, intending to hurl himself from the top. Most scholars concur, however, that the passage was never intended to show that Muhammad would choose any form of suicide.

Regardless of these differences in translation and interpretation of the various surahs, *however, a belief in the divine unlawfulness of suicide became a part of Islamic theology early in its history, and the* Quran *is most often cited as the original source of this doctrine.*

Sources

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SURAHS

2.54

And remember Moses said to his people: "O my people! Ye have indeed wronged yourselves by your worship of the calf: So turn (in repentance) to your Maker, and slay yourselves (the wrong-doers); that will be better for you in the sight of your Maker." Then He turned towards you (in forgiveness): For He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.

2.154

And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah: "They are dead." Nay, they are living, though ye perceive (it) not.

2.195

And spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to (your) destruction; but do good; for Allah loveth those who do good.

2.207

And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of Allah: And Allah is full of kindness to (His) devotees.

3.145

Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave, the term being fixed as by writing. If any do desire a reward in this life, We shall give it to him; and if any do desire a reward in the Hereafter, We shall give it to him. And swiftly shall We reward those that (serve us with) gratitude.

3.169

Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord;

3.170

They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind, who have not yet joined them (in their bliss), the (Martyrs) glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they (cause to) grieve.

4.29

O ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: But let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will: Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful!

4.30

If any do that in rancour and injustice, soon shall We cast them into the Fire: And easy it is for Allah.

4.66

If We had ordered them to sacrifice their lives or to leave their homes, very few of them would have done it: But if they had done what they were (actually) told, it would have been best for them, and would have gone farthest to strengthen their (faith);

4.74

Let those fight in the cause of Allah Who sell the life of this world for the hereafter. To him who fighteth in the cause of Allah—whether he is slain or gets victory—Soon shall We give him a reward of great (value).

4.75

And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)? Men, women, and children, whose cry is: "Our Lord! Rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from thee one who will protect; and raise for us from thee one who will help!"

4.76

Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah, and those who reject Faith fight in the cause of Evil: So fight ye against the friends of Satan: feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan.

4.77

Hast thou not turned Thy vision to those who were told to hold back their hands (from fight) but establish regular prayers and spend in regular charity? When (at length) the order for fighting was issued to them, behold! a section of them feared men as—or even more than—they should have feared Allah: They said: "Our Lord! Why hast Thou ordered us to fight? Wouldst Thou not grant us respite to our (natural) term, near (enough)?" Say: "Short is the enjoyment of this world: the Hereafter is the best for those who do right: Never will ye be dealt with unjustly in the very least!"

4.78

"Wherever ye are, death will find you out, even if ye are in towers built up strong and high!" If some good befalls them, they say, "This is from Allah"; but if evil, they say, "This is from thee" (O Prophet). Say: "All things are from Allah." But what hath come to these people, that they fail to understand a single fact?

4.79

Whatever good, (O man!) happens to thee, is from Allah; but whatever evil happens to thee, is from thy (own) soul, and We have sent thee as a messenger to (instruct) mankind. And enough is Allah for a witness.

4.80

He who obeys the Messenger, obeys Allah: But if any turn away, We have not sent thee to watch over their (evil deeds).

9.111

Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on

Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: and who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah? then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme.

18.6

Thou wouldst only, perchance, fret thyself to death, following after them, in grief, if they believe not in this Message.

HADITH: THE SAYINGS OF MUHAMMAD (7th–9th centuries)

The hadith, *speech or tradition, record the* Sunnah *("practice"), the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions, which Muslims believe were memorized and recorded by his companions and handed down from generation to generation. Many* hadith *are found in the biography* (sira) *of Muhammad. The historical tradition of* hadith *literature (sing.* hadith, *pl.* hadith [collective sense] *or* hadiths, *Arabic* ahadith) *includes procedures for comparative assessment among various reporters intended to identify lines of transmission and to differentiate genuine* hadith *from weak or fabricated ones. While the legal content of the Quran [q.v.] is very limited, the* hadith *establish precedents for regulating nearly every aspect of life. Unlike the Quran, which is believed to be the word of Allah revealed to Muhammad during his prophetic life, the* hadith *are not considered infallible; however, followers of Islam consider them to be genuine records of Muhammad's sayings and actions, and regard them as indispensable and as a source almost as fundamental as the Quran. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims recognize different* hadith *canon collections, for which authentication is based on differing methodologies of evaluation and analysis of the chains of transmission. Western scholarship beginning in the 19th century tended to argue that many of the* hadith *accounts are not always actual reports of Muhammad's sayings but instead represent opinions of the early generations of Muslim thinkers, subsequently attributed to the Prophet during the long period of oral transmission spanning some 200 years following Muhammad's death, but the compilers did place great stress on the reliability of the chain of transmission. The* hadith *were finally collected, selected, and published in six standard editions between the 9th and 11th centuries.*

The six compilers of hadith *include Muhammad ibn Isma`il al-Bukhari (810–870) and Muslim al-Hajjaj (817/821–875). Both Bukhari and Muslim were traditionists, and both were the sons of traditionists, themselves collectors and memorizers of sayings of the Prophet. Bukhari is said to have begun to study traditions at the age of ten and to have spent 40 years traveling the Muslim world collecting* hadith *from every learned man; he claimed to have "heard traditions from over 1,000 shaykhs." Muslim inherited a large fortune from his father and travelled widely in order to learn* hadith. *Of the* hadith *presented here, some are voiced by Bukhari, some by Muslim, and some agreed on by both.*

Hadith *narrated by Ad-Dahhak, Abu Huraira, and Sahl As-Sa`idi are also included. Bukhari is said to be the most reliable of all the compilers; it is said that he selected 7,397, or 2,762 without repetitions, out of 600,000 traditions and memorized 220,000 of them; he recorded each after ablution and prayer, and carefully scrutinized them for consistency with other narrators. Later in life, Bukhari was expelled by the governor of the region for refusing to give the governor's children preferential treatment by educating them at home; in the wake of this hostility, Bukhari is said to have been overheard praying one night that God might take him, and he died within the month.*

The Quran itself does not contain an explicit, incontrovertible prohibition of suicide. The hadith, *however, do; both Bukhari and Muslim make fully explicit the unlawfulness of suicide. As Franz Rosenthal pointed out, by the time of Muhammad, both Judaism and Christianity had developed negative attitudes toward suicide, and it is likely that Muhammad would have shared these. Bukhari reports a saying of Muhammad's that the person who commits suicide is punished eternally by a perpetual, forced repetition of the act of self-killing. Suicide is equated in severity with the sin of murder. Muslim gives an account of self-mutilation resulting in death. No distinction is made between suicide associated with what would now be recognized as mental illness and suicide associated with principle, religious zeal, military self-sacrifice,* jihad, *or the like. These* hadith *are the clearest canonical sources for the Islamic belief that suicide is a violation of divine law.*

Sources

Hadith, Al-Bukhari, Vol. 2, Book 23, nos. 445, 446; Vol. 4, Book 52, no. 297; Vol. 5, Book 59, nos. 514, 515, 518; Vol. 8, Book 73, nos. 73, 126; Book 76, no. 500; Book 77, nos. 603, 604; Book 78, no. 647; see e.g. Sunnah.com. Muslim, from Mishkat-ul-masabih, Vol. II, ch. 25, section 6, paragraph 1178, tr. al-Haj Maulana Fazlul Karim, Lahore, Pakistan: Law Publishing Company, 1938, material in bibliographic note, pp. 18–19. Some modifications in translation. See also Franz Rosenthal, "On Suicide in Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946): 239–259, p. 240.

FROM HADITH: THE SAYINGS OF MUHAMMAD

Suicide

The Holy Prophet said: Whoso kills himself with a thing will be punished on the Resurrection day therewith. From this as well from the traditions of this section, it appears that the sin of suicide is not less than that of murder. He will permanently reside in hell, as he killed a soul which remembered Allah, or which, if alive, would have remembered Him. Suicide is the result of pangs and overwhelming anxieties which are in turn so many boons for leading a man to Paradise.

> Abu Hurairah, reported that the Messenger of Allah said: Whoso hurls himself down from a mountain and thus kills himself will be in Hell hurling himself down therein, abiding therein and being accommodated therein for ever; whoso takes poison and thus kills himself, his poison

will be in his hand; he will be tasting it in Hell, always abiding therein, and being accommodated therein forever; and whoso kills himself with a weapon, his weapon will be in his hand; he will be plunging it into his belly in Hell, abiding therein forever.

—*Agreed*

Same reported that the Messenger of Allah said: whoso strangles himself to death, will strangle himself in Hell; and whoso shoots it, will shoot himself in Hell.

—*Bukhari*

Jundub b. Abdallah reported that the Messenger of Allah said: there was a man among those who were before you who received an wound. It became unbearable. Then he took a knife and cut off his hand therewith. Whereupon blood began to ooze out, so much so that he died. The Almighty Allah said: My servant hastened himself to Me and so I made Paradise unlawful for him.

—*Agreed*

Jaber reported that Tufail b. Amer and al-Dausi migrated to the Messenger of Allah when he had migrated to Medina, a man of his tribe also migrated with him. Then he fell ill and became exasperated. He took a scissor of his and cut off therewith his hand-joints. His hands bled till he died. Tufail b. Amer saw him in his dream. He was handsome in appearance, but he found him with his hands covered. He asked him: What did your Lord do with you? He said: He has forgiven me owing to my migration to His Prophet. He asked: what is with me that I see your hands covered? He said: It was said to me: What you yourself destroyed will not be cured for you. Tufail narrated it to the Messenger of Allah who said: O Allah, forgive his two hands.

—*Muslim*

Funerals

Volume 2, Book 23, Number 445:

Narrated Thabit bin Ad-Dahhak:
The Prophet said, "Whoever intentionally swears falsely by a religion other than Islam, then he is what he has said, (e.g. if he says, 'If such thing is not true then I am a Jew,' he is really a Jew). And whoever commits suicide with piece of iron will be punished with the same piece of iron in the Hell Fire." Narrated Jundab the Prophet said, "A man was inflicted with wounds and he committed suicide, and so Allah said: My slave has caused death on himself hurriedly, so I forbid Paradise for him."

Volume 2, Book 23, Number 446:

Narrated Abu Hurairah:
The Prophet said, "He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell Fire (forever) and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the Hell-Fire."

Fighting for the Cause of Allah

Volume 4, Book 52, Number 297:

Narrated Abu Hurairah:
We were in the company of Allah's Apostle in a *ghazwa*, and he remarked about a man who claimed to be a Muslim, saying, "This (man) is from the people of the (Hell) Fire." When the battle started, the man fought violently till he got wounded. Somebody said, "O Allah's Apostle! The man whom you described as being from the people of the (Hell) Fire fought violently today and died." The Prophet said, "He will go to the (Hell) Fire." Some people were on the point of doubting (the truth of what the Prophet had said) while they were in this state, suddenly someone said that he was still alive but severely wounded. When night fell, he lost patience and committed suicide. The Prophet was informed of that, and said, "Allah is Greater! I testify that I am Allah's Slave and His Apostle." Then he ordered Bilal to announce amongst the people: 'None will enter Paradise but a Muslim, and Allah may support this religion (i.e. Islam) even with a disobedient man.'

Military Expeditions Led By The Prophet

Volume 5, Book 59, Number 514:

Narrated Sahl b. Sa'd As-Sa'idi
Allah's Apostle (and his army) encountered the pagans and the two armies, fought and then Allah's Apostle returned to his army camps and others (i.e. the enemy) returned to their army camps. Amongst the companions of the Prophet there was a man who could not help pursuing any single isolated pagan to strike him with his sword. Somebody said, "None has benefited the Muslims today more than so-and-so." On that Allah's Apostle said, "He is from the people of the Hell-Fire certainly." A man amongst the people (i.e. Muslims) said, "I will accompany him (to know the fact)." So he went along with him, and whenever he stopped he stopped with him, and whenever he hastened, he hastened with him. The (brave) man then got wounded severely, and seeking to die at once, he planted his sword into the ground and put its point against his chest in between his breasts, and then threw himself on it and committed suicide. On that the person (who was accompanying the deceased all the time) came to Allah's Apostle and said, "I testify that you are the Apostle of Allah." The Prophet said, "Why is that (what makes you say so)?" He said "it is concerning the man whom you have already mentioned as one of the dwellers of the Hell-Fire. The people were surprised by your statement, and I said to them, 'I will try to find out the truth about him for you.' So I went out after him and he was then inflicted with a severe wound and because of that, he hurried to bring death upon himself by planting the handle of his sword into the ground and directing its tip towards his chest between his breasts, and then threw himself over it and committed suicide." Allah's Apostle then said, "A man may do what seem to people as the deeds of the dwellers of Paradise but he is from the dwellers of the Hell-Fire and another may do what seem to the people as the deeds of the dwellers of the Hell-Fire, but he is from the dwellers of Paradise."

Volume 5, Book 59, Number 515:

Narrated Abu Hurairah:
We witnessed (the battle of) Khaibar. Allah's Apostle said about one of those who were with him and who claimed to be a Muslim. "This (man) is from the dwellers of the Hell-Fire." When the battle started, that fellow fought so violently and bravely that he received plenty of wounds. Some of the people were about to doubt (the Prophet's statement), but the man, feeling the pain of his wounds, put his hand into his quiver and took out of it, some arrows with which he slaughtered himself (i.e. committed suicide). Then some men amongst the Muslims came hurriedly and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Allah has made your statement true so-and-so has committed suicide." The Prophet said, "O so-and-so! Get up and make an announcement that none but a believer will enter Paradise and that Allah may support the religion with an unchaste (evil) wicked man."

Volume 5, Book 59, Number 518:

Narrated Sahl b. Sa'd As-Sa'idi:
During one of his *ghazawat*, the Prophet encountered the pagans, and the two armies fought, and then each of them returned to their army camps. Amongst the (army of the) Muslims there was a man who would follow every pagan separated from the army and strike him with his sword. It was said, "O Allah's Apostle! None has fought so satisfactorily as so-and-so (namely, that brave Muslim)." The Prophet said, "He is from the dwellers of the Hell-Fire." The people said, "Who amongst us will be of the dwellers of Paradise if this (man) is from the dwellers of the Hell-Fire?" Then a man from amongst the people said, "I will follow him and accompany him in his fast and slow movements." The (brave) man got wounded, and wanting to die at once, he put the handle of his sword on the ground and its tip in between his breasts, and then threw himself over it, committing suicide. Then the man (who had watched the deceased) returned to the Prophet and said, "I testify that you are Apostle of Allah." The Prophet said, "What is this?" The man told him the whole story. The Prophet said, "A man may do what may seem to the people as the deeds of the dwellers of Paradise, but he is of the dwellers of the Hell-Fire and a man may do what may seem to the people as the deeds of the dwellers of the Hell-Fire, but he is from the dwellers of Paradise."

Good Manners and Form

Volume 8, Book 73, Number 73:

Narrated Thabit b. Ad-Dahhak:
(who was one of the companions who gave the pledge of allegiance to Prophet underneath the tree (Al-Hudaibiyah)) Allah's Apostle said, "Whoever swears by a religion other than Islam (i.e. if somebody swears by saying that he is a non-Muslim e.g., a Jew or a Christian, etc.) in case he is telling a lie, he is really so if his oath is false, and a person is not bound to fulfill a vow about a thing which he does not possess. And if somebody commits suicide with anything in this world, he will be tortured with that very thing on the Day of Resurrection; and if somebody curses a

believer, then his sin will be as if he murdered him; And whoever accuses a believer of *kufr* (disbelief), then it is as if he killed him."

Volume 8, Book 73, Number 126:

Narrated Thabit b. Ad-Dahhak:
The Prophet said, "Whoever swears by a religion other than Islam (if he swears by saying that he is a non-Muslim in case he is telling a lie), then he is as he says if his oath is false and whoever commits suicide with something, will be punished with the same thing in the (Hell) fire, and cursing a believer is like murdering him, and whoever accuses a believer of *kufr* (disbelief), then it is as if he had killed him."

To Make the Heart Tender

Volume 8, Book 76, Number 500:

Narrated Sa'd b. Sahl As-Sa'idi:
The Prophet looked at a man fighting against the pagans and he was one of the most competent persons fighting on behalf of the Muslims. The Prophet said, "Let him who wants to look at a man from the dwellers of the (Hell) Fire, look at this (man)." Another man followed him and kept on following him till he (the fighter) was injured and, seeking to die quickly, he placed the blade tip of his sword between his breasts and leaned over it till it passed through his shoulders (i.e., committed suicide). The Prophet added, "A person may do deeds that seem to the people as the deeds of the people of Paradise while in fact, he is from the dwellers of the (Hell) Fire: and similarly a person may do deeds that seem to the people as the deeds of the people of the (Hell) Fire while in fact, he is from the dwellers of Paradise. Verily, the (results of) deeds done, depend upon the last actions."

Volume 8, Book 77, Number 603:

Narrated Abu Hurairah:
We witnessed along with Allah's Apostle the Khaibar (campaign). Allah's Apostle told his companions about a man who claimed to be a Muslim, "This man is from the people of the Fire." When the battle started, the man fought very bravely and received a great number of wounds and got crippled. On that, a man from among the companions of the Prophet came and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Do you know what the man you described as of the people of the Fire has done? He has fought very bravely for Allah's Cause and he has received many wounds." The Prophet said, "But he is indeed one of the people of the Fire." Some of the Muslims were about to have some doubt about that statement. So while the man was in that state, the pain caused by the wounds troubled him so much that he put his hand into his quiver and took out an arrow and committed suicide with it. Off went some men from among the Muslims to Allah's Apostle and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Allah has made your statement true. So-and-so has committed suicide." Allah's Apostle said, "O Bilal! Get up and announce in public: None will enter Paradise but a believer, and Allah may support this religion (Islam) with a wicked man."

Divine Will

Volume 8, Book 77, Number 604:

Narrated Sahl b. Sa'd as-Sa'idi:
There was a man who fought most bravely of all the Muslims on behalf of the Muslims in battle (*ghazwa*) in the company of the Prophet. The Prophet looked at him and said, "If anyone would like to see a man from the people of the Fire, let him look at this (brave man)." On that, a man from the People (Muslims) followed him, and he was in that state i.e., fighting fiercely against the pagans till he was wounded, and then he hastened to end his life by placing his sword between his breasts (and pressed it with great force) till it came out between his shoulders. Then the man (who was watching that person) went quickly to the Prophet and said, "I testify that you are Allah's Apostle!" The Prophet asked him, "Why do you say that?" He said, "You said about so-and-so, 'If anyone would like to see a man from the people of the Fire, he should look at him.' He fought most bravely of all of us on behalf of the Muslims and I knew that he would not die as a Muslim (Martyr). So when he got wounded, he hastened to die and committed suicide." There-upon the Prophet said, "A man may do the deeds of the people of the Fire while in fact he belongs to the people of Paradise, and he may do the deeds of the people of Paradise while in fact he belongs to the people of Fire, and verily, (the rewards of) the deeds are decided by the last actions (deeds)."

Oaths and Vows

Volume 8, Book 78, Number 647:

Narrated Thabit b. Ad-Dahhak:
The Prophet said, "Whoever swears by a religion other than Islam, is, as he says; and whoever commits suicide with something, will be punished with the same thing in the (Hell) Fire; and cursing a believer is like murdering him; and whoever accuses a believer of disbelief, then it is as if he had killed him."

YA'QUB AL-QIRQISANI (c. 890–c. 960)

from *The Book of Lighthouses and Watchtowers* (expanded in Archive)

Ya'qub al-Qirqisani was a biblical scholar and a recorder of religious and secular law, writing during a period in which Jewish life had been heavily influenced by the rise of Islam and the centralization of Muslim rule in the caliphate at Baghdad. Al-Qirqisani was a member of the Karaite

sect, a Jewish group living in what is now Iran. The Karaites ("karah" comes from the same root as "scripture") differed from most Jewish communities by refusing to acknowledge the post-biblical tradition of canonical inclusions into the Talmud based on oral sources, the tradition known as that of the "Two Torahs." Instead, in the view of Anan, the sect's founder, oral law merely reflected the interpretations of various rabbis, not divine word. By not recognizing the oral law as one of the Two Torahs, the Karaites also challenged the Talmud, and some commentators have compared them to Protestant Christian reformers inasmuch as Anan and his disciples held, respectively, both that they had the right to confront the text directly and that they could interpret it themselves.

Al-Qirqisani was the most significant chronicler of the code of Karaite law, and in a chapter of his work Kitab al-Anwar wa'l-Maraqib (The Book of Lighthouses and Watchtowers), *he approaches the issue of suicide not from a moral point of view, but exclusively from the point of view of legality according to Old Testament law. Based on the scriptural evidence that he cites in his argument, al-Qirqisani concludes that a person "may not commit suicide under any circumstances."*

Source

Ya'qub al-Qirqisani, "On Suicide" from *The Book of Lighthouses and Watchtowers*, ed. and tr. Leon Nemoy, *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, Philadelphia: Vol. 57, No. 4, December 1938, pp. 414–420.

from THE BOOK OF LIGHTHOUSES AND WATCHTOWERS

On Suicide

This is an outlandish subject, and scarcely any writer has anything to say about it. The reason I am mentioning it is that I have seen that some people who pretend to be adherents of pure reason maintain that suicide is permissible and that he who kills himself will incur no punishment [in future life], inasmuch as he has caused harm to no one [else], but has merely injured his own self, which is his [own] property [to do with as he pleases].

I say, therefore, that there is no difference between him who kills himself and him who kills someone else. Should someone ask, why do I say this, I would answer, because the Scripture says [Ex 20:13] "thou shalt not kill," in a general way, without specifying one object [of killing] to the exclusion of another. In the same manner the Lord has said to Noah [Gen 9:6] "He that sheddeth the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." The command [to kill the shedder of blood] and the prohibition [of killing] having thus been given in a general way, we have no right to apply them to specific instances [only], or to make any exceptions, saving what God himself has excepted, either in the very place where He has prohibited [killing], or in another place.

But—the inquirer might continue—thou canst not deny that the expression "Thou shalt not kill" was intended to mean "Thou shalt not kill anyone else," and that one's own self is not included in this prohibition, just as the prohibition of destroying someone else's property does not imply that one may not [lawfully] waste away one's own possessions, since one is surely

allowed to give away as much as he wishes of his own wealth, while at the same time one may not give away property belonging to someone else. . . .

. . . Since the command "Thou shalt not kill" is a general one, I have no right to turn it into a specific one, unless I have proof which makes it specific and shows clearly that suicide is permissible. Now inasmuch as I find nothing of the kind, and perceive no proof of the permissibility of suicide, the prohibition must remain in the state of generality, rendering suicide unlawful and making no distinction between it and murder of someone else. Moreover, I see that the Scripture says [Ez 33:4] "If the listener should hear the sound of the trumpet and take no precaution, and the sword should come and take him away, his blood shall be upon his [own] head," meaning that if one is warned of the sword, but uses no caution and is consequently killed, his blood is upon his own head. Now the latter expression is the same as the one used in the verse [Jos 2:19] "And it shall be that whosoever shall issue from the doors of thine house into the outside, his blood [shall be] upon his [own] head," signifying that he himself shall be held responsible for his own blood, which proves that a man may be held accountable for his own blood, but since retribution cannot possibly be visited upon him in this world, the intention must be that he shall be called to account for it in the next. It is evident, therefore, that suicide is unlawful, and that the suicide is no different from the murderer.

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. . . As for the Scripture's failure to condemn Saul for taking his own life, that is not proof whatsoever, for Saul had committed other sins without being condemned by the Scripture for them. Rather did the Scripture ascribe his perdition to [only] two of his [many] transgressions, to wit [I Chr 10:13], "For the Lord's command which he hath not observed," referring to the affair of the Amalekites, and [*loc. cit.*] "As well as inquiring of the soothsayer and seeking [guidance from him]." It mentions [in this connection] neither his assassination of the Gibeonites, nor his killing of the priests, nor his seeking the life of David, so that even if it were certain that he is free of sin in the matter of his suicide, this would not prove that all suicides are free of guilt. For, as a matter of fact, Saul killed himself because he knew that he was doomed to die anyway, but fearing that his enemies might torture him he chose to take his own life before his enemies would [be able to] take it, or inflict upon him that which is worse than death, and that is the [true] reason for his suicide having been held free of blame.

As for the verse "Do ye not cheat one another" and the passage concerning lost property, both of these have been bound up with specific things, to wit: "Do ye not cheat one" is followed by [the specifying word] "another," so as not to make the command a general one; likewise, the injunction regarding lost property has not been left in an indefinite form, but has been made specific by means of the expression "thy brother"; as a result, both regulations forbid the [respective] actions [only] as applied to someone other than thyself. In the matter of killing, however, the case is different, for the injunction there is a broad and general one, and has not been restricted to those other than thyself, as has been done in the preceding examples. The prohibition "Thou shalt not kill" covers everyone, thyself as well as others than thyself.

As for the passage "His blood [shall be] upon his [own] head," it is followed by "But whosoever shall be with thee within thine house, his blood [shall be] upon us," stating [clearly] that should anyone be killed within [Rahab's] house, they [the Israelite spies] would accept responsibility for it, in accordance with their oath. We are to conclude therefrom that the foregoing "Whosoever shall issue from the doors of thine house, his blood

shall be upon his [own] head" implies that such a person having been killed, is to be held accountable for his own blood.

Another proof—to continue our reply—that suicide is forbidden is that fact, discussed in a foregoing chapter of our work, that if a man seeks the life of another man, the pursued is permitted to kill the pursuer [as a matter of self-defense]. Were the killing of another man [the only kind of killing that is] forbidden, while suicide were permitted, it would have been unlawful for me to save him whose killing is permissible [meaning myself] by assassinating him whose killing is [otherwise] forbidden [meaning my pursuer]. Therefore, since the Scripture has permitted me to kill another man in order to preserve my [own] life [against his murderous designs], it is evident that the duty to save my [own] life and keep it from being lost is greater than the duty to refrain from killing someone else.

Another proof are the Scriptural statements regarding people who in times of famine took to eating their [own] children, e.g. [Thr (Lamentations) 4:10] "The hands of merciful women have cooked [the flesh of] their [own] children." Should someone retort that this took place only after the children had died of starvation, he will have to be confronted with the story of the two women, one of whom accused the other before [king] Jehoram, saying [II Kings 6:29] "And she had concealed her son." The [primary] source of these [accounts] is the Scriptural curse [Deut 28:53] "Thou shalt eat the fruit of thine [own] belly," . . . a forecast of the trials which are to fall upon them and the dire necessity which is to force them to [do] such [awful things]. For it is said [Deut 28:56] "Even the tender and delicate woman amongst thee," and the rest of the story, to the effect that there shall befall them such calamity, [such] want and destitution, that [even] tender and delicate women will be driven to eat their [own] afterbirths and their [own] newly-born children, yea, even while the children are yet alive.

Another proof is that we find that some of the saintly Patriarchs, e.g. Job, Elijah and Jonah, have, on particular occasions, wished for death and have besought God, in time of [great] affliction, to grant it to them. Had they been permitted to take their own lives, they would have proceeded quickly to do so, and would have had no need to ask [God] for death . . . showing that a man may not kill himself, any more than he may kill someone else, there being no difference between the two [cases].

At this point one may ask: If it is unlawful for a man to take his own life, on the ground of the verse "Thou shalt not kill," suppose he had committed a crime calling for capital punishment, is he permitted in such a case to commit suicide for that [particular] reason? . . . Moreover, the Scripture itself requires the execution of the murderer, the adulterer and the profaner of the Sabbath; therefore, if a man has committed one of these [capital] crimes, admit then that he may lawfully take his own life.

Our answer to this is as follows: If the one who kills himself for the sake of his [grave] sin and his disobedience [to God's commands] does so solely in order to seek God['s forgiveness] and to undo that which he has wrought, there is [at his disposal] that which is more efficacious than suicide and which might undo many [capital] sins, to wit, repentance, for his suicide merely wipes out one of his sins, whereas repentance would undo all of them. This being so, it is many degrees better for him to preserve his life in order to repent and come back to God, rather than take his own life, for by remaining alive it is within his power to perform various good deeds, such as would make his repentance doubly beneficial. Suicide, on the other had, can perform nothing of the sort. It is [clear], therefore, that he may not commit suicide under any circumstances.

AHMAD IBN FADLAN (fl. 920s)

from *The Risala: By the River Volga, 922: Viking Ship-Burial*

Ahmad ibn Fadlan, a Muslim diplomat and secretary to an ambassador for the Caliph of Baghdad, was sent in 921 to the Khaganate of Bulgars along the Middle Volga. His account of his travels with the embassy, The Risala, *describes his confrontation with a people called the Rus or Varangians, who were traders and marauders of Swedish origin and Viking ideals. "I have never seen more perfect physical specimens," he says of the Rus, "tall as date palms, blond and ruddy; they wear neither tunics nor caftans, but the men wear a garment which covers one side of the body and leaves a hand free. Each man has an axe, a sword, and a knife and keeps each by him at all times." Ibn Fadlan has been described as a keen observer and good narrator, and* The Risala *contains valuable ethnographic accounts of early Europe.*

In 922, Ibn Fadlan recorded sacrifices and mortuary customs among the Rus. A leader has died; one of this man's slave women volunteers to be killed and burned together with her master in the practice of ship burial. The voluntary death of a master's slave will be echoed in later Norse sagas [q.v.], especially Gautrek's saga, where a slave is "rewarded" for faithful service by being permitted to jump from the Family Cliff. What is at issue in these Viking practices that end in death, like those in many other cultures, is the sense in which they can be said to be voluntary and the degree to which the apparently free choices that lead to them are socially controlled.

Source

Ibn Fadlan's account quoted in Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, tr. Kalle Skov, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 301–305.

from THE RISALA: BY THE RIVER VOLGA, 922: VIKING SHIP-BURIAL

I had been told that when their chieftains died cremation was the least part of their whole funeral procedure, and I was, therefore, very much interested to find out more about this. One day I heard that one of their leaders had died. They laid him forthwith in a grave which they covered up for ten days till they had finished cutting-out and sewing his costume. If the dead man is poor they make a little ship, put him in it, and burn it. If he is wealthy, however, they divide his property and goods into three parts: one for his family, one to pay for his costume, and one to make *nabid* [probably a Scandinavian type of beer] which they drink on the day when the slave woman of the dead man is killed and burnt together with her master. They

are deeply addicted to *nabid*, drinking it night and day; and often one of them has been found dead with a beaker in his hand. When a chieftain among them has died, his family demands of his slave women and servants: 'Which of you wishes to die with him?' Then one of them says: 'I do'; and having said that the person concerned is forced to do so, and no backing out is possible. Even if he wished to he would not be allowed to. Those who are willing are mostly the slave women.

So when this man died they said to his slave women: 'Which of you wants to die with him?' One of them answered, 'I do.' From that moment she was put in the constant care of two other women servants who took care of her to the extent of washing her feet with their own hands. They began to get things ready for the dead man, to cut his costume and so on, while every day the doomed woman drank and sang as though in anticipation of a joyous event.

When the day arrived on which the chieftain and his slave woman were going to be burnt, I went to the river where his ship was moored. It had been hauled ashore and four posts were made for it of birch and other wood. Further there was arranged around it what looked like a big store of wood. Then the ship was hauled near and placed on the wood. People now began to walk about talking in a language I could not understand, and the corpse still lay in the grave; they had not taken it out. They then produced a wooden bench, placed it on the ship, and covered it with carpets of Byzantine *dibag* [painted silk] and with cushions of Byzantine *dibag*. Then came an old woman whom they call 'the Angel of Death', and she spread these cushions out over the bench. She was in charge of the whole affair from dressing the corpse to the killing of the slave woman. I noticed that she was an old giant-woman, a massive and grim figure. When they came to his grave they removed the earth from the wooden frame and they also took the frame away. They then divested the corpse of the clothes in which he had died. The body, I noticed, had turned black because of the intense frost. When they first put him in the grave, they had also given him beer, fruit, and a lute, all of which they now removed. Strangely enough the corpse did not smell, nor had anything about him changed save the colour of his flesh. They now proceeded to dress him in hose, and trousers, boots, coat, and a mantle of *dibag* adorned with gold buttons; put on his head a cap of *dibag* and sable fur; and carried him to the tent on the ship, where they put him on the blanket and supported him with cushions. They then produced *nabid*, fruit, and aromatic plants, and put these round his body; and they also brought bread, meat, and onions which they flung before him. Next they took a dog, cut it in half, and flung the pieces into the ship, and after this they took all his weapons and placed them beside him. Next they brought two horses and ran them about until they were in a sweat, after which they cut them to pieces with swords and flung their meat in to the ship; this also happened to two cows. Then they produced a cock and a hen, killed them, and threw them in. Meanwhile the slave woman who wished to be killed walked up and down, going into one tent after the other, and the owner of each tent had sexual intercourse with her, saying: 'Tell your master I did this out of love for him.'

It was now Friday afternoon and they took the slave woman away to something which they had made resembling a doorframe. Then she placed her legs on the palms of the men and reached high enough to look over the frame, and she said something in a foreign language, after which they took her down. And they lifted her again and she did the same as the first time. Then they took her down and lifted her a third time and she did the same as the first and the second times. Then they gave her a chicken and she cut its head off and threw it away; they took the hen and threw it

into the ship. Then I asked the interpreter what she had done. He answered: 'The first time they lifted her she said: "Look! I see my father and mother." The second time she said: "Look! I see all my dead relatives sitting round." The third time she said: "Look! I see my master in Paradise, and Paradise is beautiful and green and together with him are men and young boys. He calls me. Let me join him then!"'

They now led her towards the ship. Then she took off two bracelets she was wearing and gave them to the old woman, 'the Angel of Death', the one who was going to kill her. She next took off two anklets she was wearing and gave them to the daughters of that woman known by the name 'the Angel of Death'. They then led her to the ship but did not allow her inside the tent. Then a number of men carrying wooden shields and sticks arrived, and gave her a beaker with *nabid*. She sang over it and emptied it. The interpreter then said to me, 'Now with that she is bidding farewell to all her women friends.' Then she was given another beaker. She took it and sang a lengthy song; but the old woman told her to hurry and drink up and enter the tent where her master was. When I looked at her she seemed completely bewildered. She wanted to enter the tent and she put her head between it and the ship. There the woman took her head and managed to get it inside the tent, and the woman herself followed. Then the men began to beat the shields with the wooden sticks, to deaden her shouts so that the other girls would not become afraid and shrink from dying with their masters. Six men entered the tent and all of them had intercourse with her. Thereafter they laid her by the side of her dead master. Two held her hands and two her feet, and the woman called 'the Angel of Death' put a cord round the girl's neck, doubled with an end at each side, and gave it to two men to pull. Then she advanced holding a small dagger with a broad blade and began to plunge it between the girl's ribs to and fro while the two men choked her with the cord till she died.

The dead man's nearest kinsman now appeared. He took a piece of wood and ignited it. Then he walked backwards, his back towards the ship and his face towards the crowd, holding the piece of wood in one hand and the other hand on his buttock; and he was naked. In this way the wood was ignited which they had placed under the ship after they had laid the slave woman, whom they had killed, beside her master. Then people came with branches and wood; each brought a burning brand and threw it on the pyre, so that the fire took hold of the wood, then the ship, then the tent and the man and slave woman and all. Thereafter a strong and terrible wind rose so that the flame stirred and the fire blazed still more.

I heard one of the Rus folk, standing by, say something to my interpreter, and when I inquired what he had said, my interpreter answered: 'He said: "You Arabs are foolish."' 'Why?' I asked. 'Well, because you throw those you love and honour to the ground where the earth and the maggots and fields devour them, whereas we, on the other hand, burn them up quickly and they go to Paradise that very moment.' The man burst out laughing, and on being asked why, he said: 'His Lord, out of love for him, has sent this wind to take him away within the hour!' And so it proved, for within that time the ship and the pyre, the girl and the corpse had all become ashes and then dust. On the spot where the ship stood after having been hauled ashore, they built something like a round mound. In the middle of it they raised a large post of birch-wood on which they wrote the names of the dead man and of the king of the Rus, and then the crowd dispersed.

ABU HAYYAN AL-TAWHIDI (c. 923–1023)

from *Borrowed Lights: On Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, probably of Persian origin, was born in or around Baghdad sometime between 922 and 932. He was a man of letters and a scholar, influenced by Sufism and the neo-Platonic philosopher Abu Sulayman. Although said to be a difficult personality, he was considered a master of Arabic style and one of the major thinkers at the conclusion of the formation of Islamic thought.

Abu Hayyan's most famous work, compiled late in his life, was al-Muqabasat, *"Borrowed Lights," a collection of 106 philosophical conversations providing a glimpse into the intellectual milieu of 10th-century Baghdad. The* Muqabasat *includes a lengthy discussion of the suicide of an impoverished and socially ostracized Muslim, articulating arguments both for and against it. According to Franz Rosenthal, despite the strong prohibition of self-killing in Islamic thought, this passage in al-Tawhidi's work shows that the idea of suicide was justified to some thinkers in 10th-century Arabia. It is the only such detailed discussion of suicide that has been preserved in the extant Arabic literature.*

Source

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, from *al-Muqabasat*, quoted in Franz Rosenthal, "On Suicide in Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 66(1946):239–259, text from pp. 249–250, citing as source, ed. Hasan as-Sandubi, Cairo, 1928–29.

from BORROWED LIGHTS: ON SUICIDE

Recently we saw what happened to a learned Šayh. This Šayh had come to live in very reduced circumstances. Therefore, people began to avoid him more and more, and his acquaintances no longer wanted to have anything to do with him. This went on for a while until one day he entered his home, tied a rope to the roof of his room, and hanged himself, thus ending his life.

When we learned about the affair, we were shocked and grieved. We discussed his story back and forth, and one of those present said: What an excellent fellow! He acted like a man! What a splendid thing he did of his own free will! His action indicates magnanimity and a great staunchness of mind. He freed himself from a long drawn-out misery and from circumstances which were unbearable, on account of which nobody wanted to have anything to do with him, and which brought him great privations and a steady reduction of his means. Everybody to whom he addressed himself turned away from him. . . .

While that person thus defended the action of the suicide, someone else replied: If that Šayh escaped from the dreadful situation which you have just described, without getting himself into another situation which might be considerably more frightful and of a much longer duration than that which he had been in, it would indeed be correct to say that he did a splendid thing. What noble fellow, one might then say, he was, considering the fact that he found strength and the means to commit such a deed! One would have to admit that every intelligent person should feel compelled to do the same thing, to imitate him and to arrive at the same decision of his own free will.

However, if he had learned from the religious law—no matter whether the ancient or the new one—that such and similar actions are forbidden, it would be necessary to say that he did something for which God has ordained quick punishment and disgrace in the painful fire of Hell. My God! He could surely have learned from any intelligent and judicious, learned and educated person, from anybody who has some intelligence and knows the elements of ethics . . . that such actions are forbidden and that even the commission of much lesser deeds is prohibited. Why did he not suspect himself and scrutinize his motives and consult someone who might have given him good advice? . . . He ought to have known that it is necessary to avoid any connection with such an action, which is detested by the intellect, considered sinful by tradition and shunned with horror by nature; for the generally known injunctions of the religious laws and the consensus of all in each generation and region show that suicide is forbidden and that nothing should be done which might lead to it. The reason for the prohibition of suicide is that suicide might be committed under the influence of ideas and hallucinations which would not have been supported by a clear mind and would not have occurred to a person in the full possession of his mental faculties. Later on, in the other world, the person who committed suicide under such circumstances would realize the baseness of his action and the great mistake he made; then, he cannot repair, correct, or retract what he did.

Even if compliance with the demands of the intellect, or information derived from both intellect and revelation would have required him to commit such a deed, he should not have handed himself over to destruction. He should not have of his own free will done something which is despised by persons who are discerning and ingenious, religious and noble. He should not have broken established customs, opposed entrenched opinions, and usurped the rights of nature. But all the more so should he have refrained from his deed since intellect and speculation have decided, without leaving the slightest doubt, that man must not separate those parts and limbs that have been joined together (to form his body); for it is not he who has put them together, and it is not he who is their real owner. He is merely a tenant in this temple for Him Who made him dwell therein and stipulated that in lieu of the payment of rent for his dwelling he take care of its upkeep and preservation, its cleaning, repair and use, in a manner which would help him in his search after happiness in both this world and the next world.

If an individual's aspirations are limited to gathering provisions for his journey to the abode of righteousness, he can be certain to reach his goal and to stay there. There he will find, all at the same time, plenty of good things, continuous rest, permanent beatitude, and ever-present joy; there will be no indigence or need, no damage or loss, no sadness, or grief, no failure or difficulties. This will be the reward of an acceptable way of life and of a long

practice of sublime human qualities, as well as a belief in the truth, propagation of righteousness, and kindness toward all creatures. If an individual lives in a manner contrary to this, the permanent misery which he will have to endure and from which he will not be able to escape will be correspondingly great.

JETSUN MILAREPA (c. 1052–c. 1135)

from *Songs of Milarepa* (expanded in Archive)

Milarepa was a major figure in Tibetan Buddhism and one of Tibet's most famous yogis and poets. His writings, often referred to as the Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, *are canonical Mahayana Buddhist texts. Milarepa was born Mila Thöpaga to a prosperous family, but when his father died and his uncle and aunt took the family's wealth, Milarepa left home to study sorcery; he engaged in a series of revenge actions against his thieving relatives. Repenting of his violent deeds, he sought guidance under the Lama Marpa. Milarepa is said to have been the first man to achieve* Vajradhara *(complete enlightenment) within one lifetime.*

This brief selection, spoken in the voice of Milarepa (then still known as Thöpaga), refers to his misdeeds and his suicidal regret for them, as well as Marpa's angry discipline. It captures the assertion by another Lama present at the time, Ngogpa, of the basis for Buddhism's rejection of suicide.

Source

W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa. A Biography from the Tibetan*, Part II, ch. 5, London: Oxford University Press, 1928, pp. 126–128. Footnotes deleted.

from SONGS OF MILAREPA

One day during a feast given to some of his disciples from the most distant parts and to the members of his own family, Lāma Marpa sat, with a long staff by his side, looking with fierce eyes at Lāma Ngogpa, who was one of those present. After a time, pointing at him with his finger, he said, "Ngogdun Chudor, what explanation hast thou to give in the matter of thy having conferred Initiation and the Truths upon this wicked person, Thöpaga?" And, as he spoke, he kept casting glances at the stick.

Lāma Ngogpa was terrified. "Precious *Guru*," he stammered, "Thy Reverence enjoined me under thine own hand and seal to initiate Thöpaga. Along with the letter, Thy Reverence

sent Naropa's garlands and rosary of rubies as a token of its genuineness, and I obeyed Thy Reverence's command. In this I have nothing with which to reproach myself; so be pleased to abate Thy Reverence's displeasure with me." As he spoke, he kept looking round about uneasily.

Marpa then turned his angry finger on me, and asked, "Where didst thou get these things?" By this time I felt as if my heart were being torn out of my body, and was in such a state of terror that I could scarcely articulate. All trembling, I faltered out that the Lady Mother had given them to me.

At that, Marpa jumped up abruptly from his seat and made towards his wife apparently with intent to belabour her with the staff. But she, apprehensive of such a thing, had risen and moved herself some distance from him. She now ran into the chapel and shut the door. The Lāma made several attempts to open it, but, failing, came back and resumed his seat, calling out, "Thou, Ngogdun-Chudor, who hast been doing something thou wert not asked to do, I command thee to go and bring me Naropa's garlands and rosary instantly." This said, he wrapped up his head in his mantle, and so remained.

Lāma Ngogpa bowed, and retired immediately to get the articles required. As soon as he came out, I, having run out of Marpa's presence at the same time as the lady, saw him from a corner, where I sat weeping; and I prayed him to take me with him. But he said, "If I take thee again without the *Guru's* express command, the outcome will only be a similar scene, which will be painful to us both. Remain here for the present. If our *Guru* refuse to be gracious to thee, I will then do what lieth in my power to help thee?"

Then I rejoined, "On account of my much evil-doing, not only do I myself suffer, but I involve thee and my Reverend Mother in a share of my troubles. I have lost all hope of obtaining the Doctrine in this life. Day by day I am only heaping up one great sin upon another. It is much better that I cut short this life. All I ask of thee is that by thy grace thou procure that my next birth shall be among [well-endowed] human beings, and be a birth in which I shall have the opportunity to obtain the Truths."

I turned away, intending to commit suicide on the spot, but Lāma Ngogpa, bursting into tears, caught hold of me and said, "Brave Grand Sorcerer, do not so! Our Mystic Doctrine, which is the essence and ultimate meaning of the Blessed Conqueror's injunctions, declareth that all our various bodily principles and faculties are divine. If we presume to close their present career before their natural period [of dissolution], we incur the guilt of killing the divine in ourselves, and must face the due punishment for the same. There is no greater sin than suicide. In the *Sūtras*, too, suicide is spoken of as a most heinous sin. Understand this well, and abandon all thought of self-slaughter. After all, our *Guru* may still be pleased to confer the Truths upon thee. But, even if he do not, there will surely be found some one who will give thee them."

Thus did Ngogpa seek to comfort me. Other of the disciples also sympathized with me, some running in to see if Marpa were yet in a mood to be addressed with safety, and some sitting down by me and trying to bring me solace. But either my heart was made of iron, or else the time had come for it to break, so acute were my sufferings. It was because of my having committed such terribly wicked deeds in the earlier part of my life, that now I had to suffer such excruciating and indescribable tortures at the very outset of my search for a Faith and Doctrine to emancipate me.'

At the hearing of this narration, none present was able to withhold tears of sympathy with the narrator; and some there were who even swooned away with excess of emotion.

This is the story of the Second Meritorious Act of Milarepa, which treateth of his chastening and his purification from sin by means of trials and tribulations, both bodily and mental.

ABU HAMID MUHAMMAD AL-GHAZALI (1056–1111)

from *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (expanded in Archive)

A native of Khorasan, of Persian origin, the Muslim theologian, sufi mystic, and philosopher Abu-Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali is one of the great figures of Islamic religious thought, as well as a critical figure in the debates over the preservation of classical Greek and Roman thought during the Dark Ages in the Christian West. Al-Ghazali taught at in Baghdad between 1091 and 1095, but, allegedly suffering from a nervous illness that made it physically impossible for him to lecture ("God put a lock unto my tongue," he wrote in his autobiography), he gave up his teaching position in order to live a life of mystical asceticism. He describes his spiritual crisis:

> One day I would determine to leave Baghdad and these circumstances, and the next day change my mind. . . . The desires of this world pulled at me and entreated me to remain, while the voice of faith cried out "Go! Go! Only a little of your life remains, yet before you there lies a lengthy voyage. All the knowledge and works that are yours today are but eye service and deceit. If you do not prepare now for the Afterlife, then when shall you do so?"

Al-Ghazali embarked on a two-year period of wandering, teaching, and writing. He traveled to Damascus on the pretext of making a pilgrimage, then to Jerusalem, finally making the hajj *or Pilgrimage in 1096 as he pursued the Sufi path of self-purification and a quest for direct knowledge of God.*

Al-Ghazali's extensive writings include The Just Mean in Belief, *written before his wanderings, and* The Revival of the Religious Sciences, *written during them. The latter shows a distrust of scholastic theology and intellectualism. In* The Precious Pearl, *a reworking of Book 40, al-Ghazali describes the four categories of persons who will be questioned in the grave by interrogating angels and affected by personifications of their good and bad deeds: the most learned and pious, the* ulama, *who are allowed into the Garden after questioning; those who did good works but were not fully spiritually advanced are made to gaze upon Hell before being released into the Garden; those who have succumbed to temptations at death, waywardness, or doubt are punished through the intermediate time they spend in grave; and finally the profligates, those unable to answer even the first of the angels' questions, "Who is your Lord?"—their punishment in the grave is the*

most severe. The first selection here, a short passage from Book 26 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences, *affirms Islam's rejection of suicide and describes two forms of suicide or para-suicidal activity that are unacceptable: suicide motivated by a desire to avoid suffering and to reach heaven, and the delayed or "slow suicide" that results from extreme asceticism and self-mortification. The second selection, from Book 40 of the* Revival, *"The Remembrance of Death," describes the Angel of Death asking Muhammad if he may enter Muhammad's house and thus take him; the Angel gives Muhammad the choice of whether to die now.Muhammad replies that he is ready to go, that is, that he is willing to die. Book 40 also describes "the most perfect of delights" that is the reward of martyrdom in the afterlife; martyrs are rewarded with entrance to the Garden immediately after death. It portrays a man already in Heaven weeping, because he can only be slain for God's sake once, but wishes he could be martyred many more times than this.*

Sources

Al-Ghazali, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. Book 26 from Al-Ghazali, *Al-Ghazali's Ihya' ulum al-Din (Revitalisation of the Sciences of Religion)*, abridged by Abd el Salam Haroun, rev. and tr. Dr. Ahmad A. Zidan, Vol. 1, Cairo: Islamic Inc. Publishing and Distribution, 1997, pp. 394–397. Book 40 from Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife. Kitab dhikr al-mawt wa-ma ba'dahu*, Book XL of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences, Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, tr. T. J. Winter, Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989, pp. 65–67, 128–129; quotation in biographical note p. xvii. See also Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981, pp. 43–45. Comments from Salman Bashier.

from THE REVIVAL OF THE RELIGIOUS SCIENCES

The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife. On the Death of the Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him peace), and of the Rightly-guided Caliphs after Him

. . . And 'A'isha said (may God be pleased with her), 'When the day of the Emissary of God's death came (may God bless him and grant him peace), the people saw an improvement in him at the day's beginning, and the men went apart from him to their homes and tasks rejoicing, leaving him with the women. While we were there we were in a state of hope and joyfulness the likes of which we had never known. And then the Prophet of God said, "Go out, away from me; this Angel seeks leave to enter." At this, everyone but myself left the house. His head had been in my lap, but now he sat up and I retired to one side of the room. He communed with the Angel at length, and then summoned me and returned his head to my lap, bidding the women enter. "I did not sense that that was Gabriel, upon him be peace," I said. "Indeed, 'A'isha," he replied. "'That was the Angel of Death, who came to me and said, 'I am sent by God (Great and Glorious is He!), Who has commanded me not to enter your house without your consent. So if you should withhold it from me I shall go back, but should you give it me, then

shall I enter. And He has enjoined me not to take your spirit until you so instruct me; what, then, might your instructions be?' 'Hold back from me', I said, 'until Gabriel has come to me, for this is his hour.'"

And 'A'isha [continued, and] said, (may God be pleased with her), 'So we came into the presence of a matter for which we had neither answer nor opinion. We were downcast; it was as if we had been struck by a calamity about which we could do nothing. Not one of the people of the Household spoke because of their awe in the face of this affair and because of a fear which filled our depths. At his hour, Gabriel came (I felt his presence) and gave his greeting. The people of the Household left, and he entered, saying, "God (Great and Glorious is He!) gives you His greetings, and asks how you are, although He knows better than you your condition; yet He desires to increase you in dignity and honour, and to render your dignity and honour greater than that of all creatures, that this may be a precedent [*sunna*] for your nation." "I am in pain," he said. And the Angel replied, "Be glad, for God (Exalted is He!) has willed to bring you to that which He has made ready for you." "O Gabriel," he said. "The Angel of Death asked for permission to enter!" and he told him of what had transpired. And Gabriel said, "O Muhammad! Your Lord longs for you! Has He not given you to know His purpose for you? Nay, by God, never has the Angel of Death sought permission of anyone, no more than is his permission to be sought at any time. It is only that your Lord is making perfect your honour while He longs for you." "Then do not leave until he comes," he said.

Then he allowed the women to enter, and said, "Fatima, draw near." She leaned over him and he whispered in her ear. When she raised her head again she was weeping, and could not bear to speak. Then he said again, "Bring your head close," and she leaned over him while he whispered something to her. Then she raised her head, and was smiling, unable to speak. What we saw in her was something most astonishing. Afterwards we questioned her about what had happened, and she said, "He told me, 'Today I shall die,' so I wept; then he said, 'I have prayed to God to let you be the first of my family to join me, and to set you with me,' so I smiled."

'Then she brought her two sons close by him. He drew in their fragrance. Then the Angel of Death came, greeted him, and asked leave to enter. He granted it to him, and the Angel said, "What are your instructions, O Muhammad?" "Take me now to my Lord," he said. "Yes indeed," he responded, "on this day of yours. Truly your Lord longs for you. He has not paused over any man as He has paused over you, nor has He ever forbidden me to enter without permission upon anyone else. But now, your hour is come." And he went out. Then came Gabriel, who said, "Peace be upon you, O Emissary of God! This is the final time I shall ever descend to the earth. Revelation is folded up, the world is folded up, and I had on the earth no business save with you. Upon it now I have no purpose save being present with you, after which I shall remain in my place."

. . . And 'A'isha [continued, and] said, "I would say to him when he came round, "May my father and mother be your ransom, and myself and all my family! How your forehead perspires!" And he said, "O 'A'isha, the soul of the believer departs with his sweat, while that of the unbeliever departs through his jaws like that of the donkey." At this, we were afraid and sent for our families.

'The first man to come not having seen him was my brother, whom my father had sent. But the Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) died before the arrival of anyone. . . .

On the True Nature of Death, and What the Dead Man Undergoes in the Grave Prior to the Blast on the Trump

Said Ya'la ibn al-Walid, 'I was walking one day with Abu'l-Darda', and asked him, "What do you like to happen to those you like?" "Death," he replied. "But if one has not died yet?" I asked, and he answered, "That his progeny and wealth should be scanty. I feel a liking for death because it is liked only by the believer, whom it releases from his imprisonment. And I like one's progeny and wealth to be scanty because these things are a trial, and can occasion familiarity with the world, and familiarity with that which must one day be left behind is the very extremity of sorrow. All that is other than God, His remembrance, and familiarity with Him must needs be abandoned upon one's death."

For this reason 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr said, 'When his soul, or spirit, emerges, the believer is as a man who was in a prison, from which he was released and travelled about and took pleasure in the world.'

This [Narrative just] mentioned refers to the state of the man who withdrew from the world, being wearied of it and finding no pleasure in it save that which is the remembrance of God (Exalted is He!), and who was kept by the distractions of the world from his Beloved, and who was hurt by the vicissitudes of his desires. In death he found a release from every harmful thing, and won unrestricted solitude with his Beloved, who was ever his source of consolation. How right it is that this should be the pinnacle of bliss and beatitude!

The most perfect of delights is that which is the lot of the Martyrs who are slain in the way of God. For when they advance into battle they cut themselves off from any concern with the attachments of the world in their yearning to meet God, happy to be killed for the sake of obtaining His pleasure. Should such a man think upon the world he would know that he has sold it willingly for the Afterlife, and the seller's heart never inclines to that which has been sold. And when he thinks upon the Afterlife, he knows that he had longed for it, and has now purchased it. How great, then, is his rejoicing at that which he has bought when he comes to behold it, and how paltry his interest in what he has sold when from it he takes his leave! For fighting in the battlefield is a cause for dying in such a state of bliss . . . which the martyr attains as soon as his breath is cut off . . . Concerning this said Ka'b, 'In Heaven there is a weeping man who, when asked, "Why do you weep, although you are in Heaven?" replies, "I weep because I was slain for God's sake no more than once; I yearn to go back that I might be slain many times."'

TOSAFOT
(12–14th centuries)

On Avodah Zarah 18a
On the Torah: Concerning Genesis Rabbah (Genesis 9:5)

Tosafot, *meaning "additions," refers to a body of explanatory and critical remarks made by a group of Talmudic scholars known as the* tosafists, *who wrote in France and Germany from the late 11th–12th through the 14th centuries, during the time of the Crusades, and while Spanish Jewry in the 14th and 15th centuries was subject to the Inquisition and the Expulsion. The first recorded tosafists, Meir ben Samuel of Ramerupt and Judah ben Nathan, were sons-in-law to the famous 11th-century Talmudic scholar Rashi; it is debated whether the Tosafot were written as direct commentary on the Talmud [q.v., under Babylonian Talmud] or as a supplement to Rashi's commentary. Another of the first recorded tosafists, Rashi's grandson Jacob ben Meir Tam, was the leading figure in the French school of Tosafot. Many schools of Tosafot followed in the next two centuries; the commentaries they produced were gathered together to form a significant contribution to rabbinic literature. They were intended for those well advanced in the study of Talmud, and their seeming simplicity presupposes extensive familiarity with a complex prior tradition.*

Two tosafist selections are included in this volume. The first is a commentary on the description of the death of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon in Avodah Zarah, *a tractate of the Babylonian Talmud [q.v.]. In the commentary, the tosafist states a general conclusion that despite Rabbi Chanina's pronouncement that he should endure death by fire rather than "harming himself" {i.e., hastening his death by inhaling the flames}, it is proper to commit suicide to avoid sinning {i.e. apostasy} under great duress not only is such an act permissible, but in these circumstances, it ought to be done. The tosafist approvingly cites as precedent the suicides of the 400 boys and girls who drowned themselves to escape forced prostitution.*

The second passage presented here is a 13th-century commentary from the Tosafot on the Torah [q.v., under Hebrew Bible], which reflects some of the arguments relating to the brief statements in Genesis Rabbah *[q.v.] regarding the prohibition of suicide and some possible exceptions. In this passage, the tosafist raises questions about suicide and martyrdom, including opposing views about whether allowing oneself to be martyred or actively killing oneself in times of persecution are rightful acts. Some later commentators, such as Luria [q.v.] will argue no; others, like Margolioth [q.v.], appear to say yes, and the question raised here remains a pressing one throughout the later Jewish tradition.*

Source

Tosafot: On Avodah Zarah 18a; on Genesis 9:5, tr. Baruch Brody.

ON AVODAH ZARAH 18A

R. Tam said: In those cases in which they are afraid that idolaters may force them to sin by tortures that they will not be able to withstand, then it is a *mitzva* to harm themselves (i.e., commit suicide), as in the case of the young people taken captive to be used as prostitutes who threw themselves into the sea.

ON THE TORAH: CONCERNING GENESIS RABBAH (GENESIS 9:5)

This means that I might think that even people like them [Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah] who gave themselves to martyrdom may not kill themselves if they were afraid that they could not stand the test. "But" tells me that in times of persecution one may allow oneself to be killed and one may kill oneself. The same with Saul. . . . And it is from here that those who killed the children in the time of persecution brought a proof [to justify their action]. Others prohibit the practice. They explain [the remarks of Genesis Rabbah] as follows: I might think that this prohibition applies even to Chananyah and his friends who are already sentenced to death. We are told otherwise by "but." Even they, however, may not kill themselves. . . . Saul acted against normative opinion. . . . There was one rabbi who killed many children in the time of persecution because he was afraid that they would be forcibly apostasized. A second rabbi who was with him was very angry and called him a murderer. He [the first rabbi] paid no attention. . . . Afterwards, the decree was lifted and if he had not killed the children, they would have lived.

HENRY DE BRACTON (c. 1210–1268)

from *On the Laws and Customs of England*

Where a Man Commits Felony Upon His Own Person

Henry de Bracton (Henricus de Brattona or Bractona) was an English jurist, judge, and important ecclesiastical figure in the 13th century. He was born in Bratton Clovelly, though the exact date is unknown, and was most likely educated at Oxford before becoming an itinerant judge in 1245. He was later appointed to a judgeship in the king's court and became archdeacon of Barnstable in 1263. He also served as chancellor of Exeter Cathedral and in 1265, according to legend, he was made chief justiciar of England by King Henry III.

Bracton is known principally for his association with the lengthy Latin work De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae, *or* On the Laws and Customs of England, *the first systematic and comprehensive treatment of English law. The work was never actually completed, and recent scholars have thrown serious doubt on the claim that it was originally written by Bracton, suggesting instead that most of the book was written in the 1220s and 1230s. Bracton appears to have been the last owner of the manuscript and a redactor rather than the original author.* On the Laws *was based largely on the combination of Roman and canon law that was taught in universities at the time, the* ius commune, *and it established a written authority for existing common law. The work became the standard for many later treatises on law in England, and it was not until Blackstone [q.v.] in the 18th century that an attempt was made again to systematize the entire body of English law.*

On the Laws *delineates the various legal treatments of cases involving suicide, interpreting self-killing as a felony committed against oneself. The work makes a series of fine distinctions based on the circumstances of and motivation for the act of suicide, though many of these were later lost in the often wholesale denunciation of suicide as* felo de se, *or "felon of himself," freely spoken of as "self-murder."* On the Laws *attempts to distinguish between suicides committed to avoid legal penalty for a previous felony—in these cases the perpetrator is assumed guilty—and those in situations of depression ("weariness of life") and intolerable physical pain. It also interprets what are now called "dyadic" suicides, those suicides intended to affect another person, as felonies where the intent was to injure. Penalties for suicide variously involve forfeiture of inheritance and/or moveable goods, penalties that primarily affect surviving family members or heirs. In cases of mental illness, however, the inheritance and property are preserved. This latter exception would be preserved in later centuries, though some of* On the Laws' *fine distinctions concerning the intent and impact of suicide would be lost. Nevertheless, these laws, set in writing for the first time by* On the Laws, *established a legal approach to suicide and property that shaped English law for centuries to come.*

Source

Henrici de Bracton, *Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, Libri Quinque, ed. Sir Travers Twiss, London: Longman & Co., 1879, Book III, Of the Crown, Treatise II, ch. 31, pp. 505, 507, 509. Online at http://heinonline.org.

from ON THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF ENGLAND

WHERE A MAN COMMITS FELONY UPON HIS OWN PERSON

Of Pleas of the Crown

Just as man may commit felony by slaying another so may he do so by slaying himself, the felony is said to be done to himself, as where one has been accused of some crime and been arrested [or outlawed] [as] for homicide or with the proceeds of theft, or apprehended in the course of some evil deed and crime, and kills himself in fear of the crime that hangs over him; he will have no heir, because the felony previously committed, the theft or homicide or the like, is thus convicted.

But the goods of those who destroy themselves when they are not accused of a crime or taken in the course of a criminal act are not appropriated by the fisc [King's treasury], for it is not the wickedness of the deed that is reprehensible but that the fear of guilt in the accused takes the place of confession. Therefore if they are accused of or apprehended in the course of a crime and kill themselves let their goods be confiscated, that is, the goods of those who know they deserve death, as where if they were found guilty of their crime they would be condemned to death or exile.

But if a man slays himself in weariness of life or because he is unwilling to endure further bodily pain [as where he drowns himself or throws himself from a height, or kills himself in some other way,] he may have a successor, but his movable goods are confiscated. He does not lose his inheritance, only his movable goods, [because no felony is proved, nor is there any precedent crime for which he ought to be in peril of life or members]. [This is true] of those who drown or are crushed, who die by misadventure, but if a man hangs himself are his heirs not thereby disinherited? [No], according to some, nor does his wife lose her dower, except in the case above, because [of] a felony done to himself he cannot be convicted. But if one lays violent hands upon himself without justification, through anger and ill-will, as where wishing to injure another but unable to accomplish his intention he kills himself, he is to be punished and shall have no successor, because the felony he intended to commit against the other is proved and punished, for one who does not spare himself would hardly have spared others, had he had the power. But what shall we say of a madman bereft of reason? And of the deranged, the delirious and the mentally retarded? Or if one labouring under a high fever drowns himself or kills himself? *Quaere* whether such a one commits felony *de se*. It is submitted that he does not, nor do such persons forfeit their inheritance or their chattels, since they are without sense and reason and can no more commit an *injuria* or a felony than a brute animal, since they are not far removed from brutes, as is evident in the case of a minor, for if he should kill another while under age he would not suffer judgment. [That a madman is not liable is true, unless he acts under pretense of madness while enjoying lucid intervals.]

THE NORSE SAGAS (c. 1220–c. 1400)

from *The Ynglinga Saga: Odin Marks Himself with a Spear* **(in Archive only)**

from *Gautrek's Saga: The Family Cliff* **(expanded in Archive)**

from *Njal's Saga: The Burning of Njal* **(in Archive only)**

The term "Viking" is a collective name for Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, and other Old Norse-speaking peoples of the period from roughly the 8th to 11th centuries, seafaring raiders who lived by plunder, conquest, and trade. Also called Northmen or Norsemen, many were expert shipbuilders and seamen, and their voyages ranged across some 5,000 miles from Scandinavia to England, France, Spain, Italy,

North Africa, Greenland, and North America to the borders of Persia. Viking raids on European and other lands were ruthless and savage, and the Vikings were widely feared. The Viking Age was characterized by a period of a gradual consolidation of national political life, during which chieftains and notable families vied for power at all levels of government.

The body of literature known as the Norse sagas documents these elaborate political intrigues, and both the sagas and occasional foreign observers like Ibn Fadlan [q.v.] provide insight into Viking religious and cultural practices. The term "saga" is borrowed from the Old Norse and an Icelandic word to designate an Old Norse prose narrative; it has been described as a combination of story, tale, and history. The oldest sagas are so-called apostles' sagas and saints' lives, based on anonymous translations from the Latin; other genres of saga include what are known as kings' sagas, sagas about Icelanders, biographies of poets, sagas about knights, and sagas of ancient times, fictionalized accounts of the history of earlier Viking peoples from the year 874, the settlement of Iceland, to 1000, the conversion to Christianity, and beyond. The best of these works are considered the highest achievement of the medieval storytelling art in Northern Europe. The selections included here were all written in Iceland, and while they purport to describe earlier periods, they shed light on medieval Scandinavian cultures of the 13th and 14th centuries. Of particular interest is the tenuous distinction in Viking culture, apparent from the time of the practices described by Ibn Fadlan several centuries earlier on into high Viking culture, between voluntarily allowing oneself to die and voluntarily killing oneself. Either form of death could involve violence and so ensure entrance into Valhalla.

Odin, the god of battle, knowledge, and poetry, appears as the chief pagan figure in medieval Scandinavian polytheism. Odin's demands for sacrifice were immense and may have included animals, other human beings (e.g., slaves and enemies), and the self by suicide. Indeed, some have claimed he was known as the "Lord of the Gallows" or "God of the Hanged." Both the Poetic Edda *and the* Prose Edda *describe Odin's self-destructive acts, including hanging himself, torture between two fires, and on different occasions, impaling himself for nine days and giving up an eye for knowledge. In a section known as the "Rune Poem," the* Poetic Edda *relates:*

Odin said:
I know that I hung on a windy tree
for nine long nights;
pierced by a spear—Odin's pledge—
given myself to myself.
—Havamal

Through this act of self-mutilation, it is said, Odin sought to discover the runes and, through them, become possessed of secret wisdom.

The Ynglinga Saga, *from which the first selection is taken, was compiled from earlier sources by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). It forms part of the* Heimskringla, *a history of the reigns of the Norse kings from the end of the 3rd century to 1177. The* Ynglinga Saga *tells the story of Odin—then a powerful king—as he lay dying in bed. According to this tradition, Odin marked his dying body with the point of a spear and thus prepared the way for the worthy to enter Valhalla, "the Hall of those who die by violence" (literally, "corpse hall"), a hall of feasting that courageous and mighty warriors enjoy after death. With Odin's example before them, it was considered a disgrace for a man to die unwounded in bed, not in battle; death by violence was preferable. If a Viking followed*

Odin's example by dying violently in battle or from a self-inflicted wound, a portion of the rejoicing at Valhalla might be his. The Valkyries chose the best and most heroic of the slain for Odin; the goddess Freyja, as the goddess of love, war and sex, also got to select half. Death in battle was the greatest honor and greatest qualification for Valhalla; suicide was next best, but those who died peacefully in their beds of old age or disease were excluded from Valhalla for all eternity.

The second selection, taken from the first of the three tales that form Gautrek's Saga *(13th century), tells the story of King Gauti of Gautland, who becomes lost in a forest and is given shelter by a most peculiar family. This family claims Gillings Bluff as their "Family Cliff," which serves to control family size and ensure a good death. By throwing themselves down from its height, family members will be able to die immediately without suffering from illness, misfortune, starvation, or infirmity, and in realizing a violent death, they will, they believe, be transported directly to Odin's welcoming abode. When King Gauti arrives, the family perceives the intrusion and the expectation that they feed the guest as such an affront, they decide it is time to use the Family Cliff. They take a slave along as a "reward" for his faithful service. A daughter survives, however, and bears King Gauti a son, Gautrekr, who later becomes king and plays a role in the second part of the saga.*

Njal's Saga, *or the "Story of Burnt Njal" (probably written between 1275–1290), the longest and most highly acclaimed of the Norse sagas, is the story of two warring families. In the selection presented here, a complex plot reaches its climax as Njal, a wise and peace-loving father, when he learns that he and his family are surrounded and outmanned by their enemies, allows himself, together with his wife, sons, and a grandson, to die violent deaths by fire rather than suffer a continued existence in shame. When Njal's body is found afterward, his friend reports that his ". . . body and visage seem to me so bright that I have never seen any dead man's body as bright as his."*

Sources

Edda passage: *The Poetic Edda*, tr. Patricia Terry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, p. 138); *Ynglinga Saga*, ch. 6–11, 44, Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla: The Norsking Sagas*, tr. Samuel Laing (1844), available online at http://omacl.org from the Online Medieval and Classical Library; *Gautrek's Saga: Gautrek's Saga and Other Medieval Tales*, trs. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (New York: New York University Press; London: University of London Press, 1968, chs. 1–2, pp. 25–32); *Njal's Saga*, Sir George Webbe Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal* (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911, chs. 20, 127–28, 131, pp. 34, 235–39, 246–47).

GAUTREK'S SAGA

The Family Cliff

This is the start of an amusing story about a certain King Gauti. He was a shrewd sort of man, very quiet, but generous and outspoken. King Gauti ruled over West Gotaland, lying east of the Kjolen Mountains between Norway and Sweden; the Gota River separates Gotaland from the Uplands. . . . King Gauti started out with his retainers and his finest hounds to hunt deer in the forest. The king sighted a fine stag and set his heart on getting it, so he unleashed his

hounds and began chasing hard after it. This went on all day, and by evening he had lost all his fellow huntsmen and was deep into the forest. He realized that he wouldn't be able to get back to them, as it was already dark and he'd covered so much ground during the day. . . . Gauti had been hunting so hard that he'd thrown off all his clothes except for his underwear. He'd lost his socks and shoes, and his legs and feet were badly torn by stones and branches. By now it was night and very dark, and he had no idea where he was going, so he stopped to listen if he could hear anything, and after a little while he heard the bark of a dog.

Shortly afterwards he saw a small farmstead, and standing outside was a man with a woodcutter's axe. When he saw the king coming closer, the man pounced on the dog and killed it.

'This is the last time you'll show a stranger the way to our house,' he said. 'It's obvious, this man's so big he'll eat up all the farmer has once he gets inside. Well, that won't ever happen if I can help it.'

The king heard what the man said and smiled to himself. It occurred to him that he wasn't at all suitably dressed for sleeping out; on the other hand, he wasn't certain what sort of hospitality he would be offered if he waited for an invitation, so he walked boldly up to the door. The other man ran into the doorway with the idea of keeping him out, but the king forced his way past him into the house. He came into the living-room, where he saw four men and four women, but there wasn't a word of welcome for the King Gauti. So he sat down.

One of them, evidently the master of the house, spoke up. 'Why did you let this man in?' he asked the slave at the door.

'I wasn't a match for him,' said the slave, 'he was so powerful.'

'What did you do when that dog started barking?' said the farmer.

'I killed the dog,' said the slave, 'I didn't want it to lead any more roughs like this to the house.'

You're a faithful servant,' said the farmer, 'and I can't blame you for this awkward situation that's cropped up. It's difficult to find the proper reward for the trouble you've taken, but tomorrow I'll repay you by taking you along with me.'

It was a well-furnished house and the people were good-looking but not particularly big. It struck the king that they were frightened of him. The farmer ordered the table to be laid, and food was served. When the king saw that he wasn't going to be invited to share the meal, he sat down at the table next to farmer, picked up some food and settled down to eat. When the farmer saw this, he stopped eating himself and pulled his hat down over his eyes. Nobody said a word. After the king had finished eating, the farmer pushed up his hat and ordered the platters to be cleared from the table . . . 'since there's no food left there now,' he said.

The king lay down to sleep, and a little later on one of the women came up to him and said, 'Wouldn't you like me to give you a bit of hospitality?'

'Things are looking up now you're willing to talk to me,' said the king. 'Your household seems a pretty dull one.'

'Don't be surprised at that,' said the girl.' 'In all our lives, we've never had a single visitor before. I don't think the master is too pleased to have you as a guest,'

'I can easily compensate him for all that he spends on my account,' said the king, 'as soon as I get back to my own home,'

'I'm afraid this queer business will bring us something more from you than compensation,' said the woman.

'I'd like you to tell me what you and your family are called,' said the king.

'My father's called Skinflint,' she said, and the reason is, he's so mean he can't bear to watch his food stocks dwindle or anything else he owns. My mother's known as Totra because she'll

never wear any clothes unless they're already in tatters. She has the idea that this is very sound economics.'

'What are your brothers called?' asked the king.

'One's called Fjolmod, another Imsigull, and the third Gilling,' she said.

'What about you and your sisters?' asked the king.

'I'm called Snotra, because I'm the most intelligent. My sisters are called Hjotra and Fjotra,' she said. 'There's a precipice called Gillings Bluff near the farm, and we call its peak Family Cliff. The drop's so great there's not a living creature could ever survive it. It's called Family Cliff simply because we use it to cut down the size of our family whenever something extraordinary happens, and in this way our elders are allowed to die straight off without having to suffer any illness. And then they can go straight to Odin, while their children are spared all the trouble and expense of having to take care them. Every member of our family is free to use this facility offered by the cliff, so there's no need for any of us to live in famine or poverty, or put up with any other misfortunes that might happen to us.

'I hope you realize, my father thinks it quite extraordinary, your coming to our house. It would have been remarkable enough for any stranger to take a meal with us, but this really is a marvel, that a king, cold and naked, should have been to our house. There's no precedent for it, so my father and mother have decided to share out the inheritance tomorrow between me and my brother and sisters. After that they're going to take the slave with them and pass on over Family Cliff on the way to Valhalla. My father feel's that's the least reward he could give the slave for trying to bar your way into the house, to let the fellow share this bliss with him. Besides, he's quite sure Odin won't ever receive the slave unless he goes with him.'

'I can see that you're the most eloquent member of your family,' said the king, 'and you can depend on me. I take it you're still a virgin, so you'd better sleep with me tonight.'

She said that was entirely up to him.

In the morning when the king woke up, Snotra came to see him off.

'I'd like to ask you to come with me,' said King Gauti, 'I've an idea our meeting may have certain consequences. If you have a boy, call him Gautrek; it'll remind you of me and all the trouble I've caused your family.'

'I think you're pretty near to the mark,' she said. 'But I shan't be able to go along with you now, as it's today my parents divide their property between me and my brothers and sisters. When that's done my father and my mother intend to move on over Family Cliff.'

. . . when Snotra came back to the house, there was her father squatting over his possessions.

'What an extraordinary thing to happen,' he said, 'a king has paid us a visit, eaten us out of house and home and then taken away what we could least afford to lose. It's clear to me that we won't be able to stay together any longer as one family since we're reduced to poverty. That's why I've gathered together all my things. And now I'm going to divide them up between my sons. I'm going to take my wife along to Valhalla, and my slave as well, since it's the least I can do to repay him for his faithful service, to let him go there with me.'

'Gilling is to have my fine ox, to share with his sister Snotra. Fjolmod and his sister Hjotra are to have my bars of gold, Imsigull and his sister Fjotra all my cornfields. And now I want to implore you, my children, not to add to the family, so that you'll be able to preserve what you've inherited.'

When Skinflint had said all he wanted, the family climbed up to Gillings Bluff. After that the young people helped their parents to pass on over Family Cliff, and off they went, merry and bright, on the way to Odin.

Not long after, Snotra gave birth to a beautiful boy. She chose a name for him and called him Gautrek.

'What a queer thing to happen,' said Gilling, 'there's no hiding this any longer. I'm going to tell my brothers.'

'Our whole way of life is being threatened by this remarkable event,' they declared. 'This is indeed a serious violation of our rule.'

Gilling said:

How stupid of me
to move my hand
and touch the woman's cheek.
It doesn't take much
to make a son
if that's how Gautrek was got.

They said it wasn't his fault, particularly since he'd repented and was wishing it had never happened. He said he'd willingly pass on over Family Cliff, and added that this little affair might be only a beginning. His brother told him to wait and see whether anything else would happen.

Fjolmod used to herd his sheep all day, carrying the gold bars with him wherever he went. One day he fell asleep and was woken up by two black snails crawling over the gold. He got the idea that the gold had been dented where it was really only blackened, and he thought it greatly diminished.

'It's a terrible thing,' he said, 'to suffer such a loss. If this should happen once more I'll be penniless when I go to see Odin. So I'd better pass on over Family Cliff just to cover myself in case it happens again. Things have never looked so black, not since my father handed me out all this money.'

. . . Then he and his wife went up to Gillings Bluff and passed on over Family Cliff.

One day Imsigull was inspecting his cornfields. He saw a bird called the sparrow—it's about the size of a tit. He thought the bird might have caused some serious damage, so he walked round the fields till he saw where the bird had picked a single grain from one of the ears. Then he said:

'The sparrow's done dire devastation
to Imsigull's field of corn.
He ravaged an ear
And gobbled a grain;
What grief to the kin of Totra!

Then he and his wife passed joyfully on over Family Cliff, unable to risk such another loss.

One day, Gautrek happened to be outside when he noticed the fine ox - the boy was seven years old at the time. It so happened that he stabbed the ox to death with a spear. Gilling was watching and said:

'The young boy has killed
that ox of mine,
a deadly sinister omen.

Never again
Shall such treasure be mine,
no matter how old I grow.

'This has really gone too far,' he added. And then he climbed up Gillings Bluff and passed on over Family Cliff.

Now there were only two of them left, Snotra and her son Gautrek. She made them both ready for a journey, and off they went all the way to King Gauti who gave his son a good welcome. So from then on Gautrek was brought up at his father's court.

THOMAS AQUINAS (c. 1225–1274)

from *Summa Theologiae: Whether One is Allowed to Kill Oneself*

St. Thomas Aquinas, the Italian scholastic philosopher and theologian, and the principal theological authority within the Roman Catholic Church and progenitor of the tradition known as Thomism, was the son of an Italian count, related through his mother to the Hohenstaufen dynasty. At the age of five, Thomas was placed in the care of the monks at the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino to be educated as a monk and later to become abbot, but after eight years, political circumstances forced him to leave. He then studied in Naples. In complete opposition to his family's wishes, he became involved in the Dominican order, finding its emphasis on intellectualism more suitable to his interests. In 1245, Thomas escaped the house arrest he had been kept under by his family to prevent him from joining the Dominican order. As a Dominican, he was sent to Naples, then Rome, and then Paris, where he studied under the German philosopher and theologian Albertus Magnus. Thomas then followed his teacher to Cologne, where he was reluctantly appointed to be magister studentium. *Thomas returned to the University of Paris to study for a master's degree in theology in 1252 and was named master of theology in 1256. He wrote prolifically until December 1273, when a visionary experience changed him. When his secretary asked him why he had ceased to write, he said, "All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."*

Thomas was greatly influenced not only by the Christian tradition but also by the works of Aristotle, which, preserved since antiquity in Arabic libraries, had remained mostly unknown in the Latin West until the end of the 12th century. In what is recognized as Thomas's most important work, Summa Theologiae *(1266–1273), he attempts to integrate Aristotelian thought with Catholic doctrine and to clarify many points of doctrine by synthesizing faith and reason into a coherent whole. Thomas believed that divine revelation and human reason were both aspects of the same uniform truth and that they could not conflict with one another; reason can discover some theological truths by observing the effects of God's work in the world, yet the role of reason is limited, and faith is necessary to understand and believe what is unknowable by reason alone. Thomas also wrote a series of commentaries on Aristotle and the Bible, as well as* Summa contra Gentiles *(1260), a manual of concise arguments in defense of Church doctrine for use by missionaries attempting to convert Muslims and Jews.*

Thomas often traveled between France and Italy, and on March 7, 1274, just a few months after his visionary experience, while en route to Lyon, he became ill and died at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova. He was canonized in 1323 and proclaimed doctor of the church in 1567; he is often known as the Angelic Doctor.

The following selection is taken from the Summa Theologiae, *2a2ae, question 64, article 5. In this work, Aquinas begins each article by stating the reverse of his conclusion and the objections to a particular claim ("it appears that . . ."), then responds with a statement of the correct conclusion and the rebuttal to each of the previous objections in turn. In Question 64, article 5, Thomas argues against the legitimacy of suicide, incorporating the arguments of both Aristotle (referred to as "the Philosopher") and Augustine. Thomas's central argument appeals to Augustine's inclusive interpretation of the Biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill": since there is a prohibition against killing human beings and suicide is killing a human being, suicide is therefore a sin, to which Thomas adds three further reasons: an argument from the natural inclination to live, an argument based on social community, and the argument that life ought not be rejected because it is a gift from God.*

Sources

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, question 64, article 5, tr. Michael Rudick. Quotation in introduction from Angelico Ferrua, *S[ancti] Thomae Aquinatis vitae fontes praecipuae* (Alba, IT: Edizioni domenicane, 1968, p. 318).

from SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2A2Æ, Q. 64, A. 5

WHETHER ONE IS ALLOWED TO KILL HIMSELF

We proceed to the fifth article.

1. It appears that one is permitted to kill himself. Homicide is a crime in that it is contrary to justice, but, as proven [by Aristotle] in *Ethics*, Book V, no one can do an injustice to himself; therefore, no one sins by killing himself.
2. Moreover, those with public authority are allowed to kill criminals; but sometimes one with public authority is himself a criminal, and so he is allowed to kill himself.
3. Moreover, it is permissible to submit oneself voluntarily to a smaller danger in order to avoid a greater, as one may amputate an infected member in order to save the whole body. Sometimes one may, by killing himself, avoid a greater evil, such as a wretched life or corruption through some sin; therefore, it is permissible for one to kill himself.
4. Moreover, Samson killed himself (Judges xvi), yet he is numbered among the saints, as is evident from Hebrews xi. Therefore, it is permissible for one to kill himself.
5. Moreover, it is said in II Maccabees xiv that a certain Razis killed himself, "choosing to die nobly rather than be subject to sinners and to injuries unworthy of his birth." Therefore, it is not unlawful to kill oneself.

On the contrary is what Augustine says in Book I of *The City of God:* "We understand the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' to pertain to man. Kill no other man, nor yourself; for he who kills himself kills another man."

I respond by saying that to kill oneself is altogether unlawful for three reasons. First, because every thing loves itself, it is thus proper for every thing to keep itself in being and resist decay as far as it can. Therefore, to kill oneself is contrary to natural inclination, and contrary to the charity according to which everyone ought to love himself. Hence self-killing is always a mortal sin, inasmuch as it stands against natural law and charity.

Second, because every thing that is a part belongs to a whole, every man is part of a community, and as such is of the community. Therefore, he who kills himself injures the community, as is proven by the Philosopher in his *Ethics*, Book V.

Third, because life is a gift divinely given to man, and subject to the power of Him "who kills and makes to live." Therefore, he who deprives himself of life sins against God, just as he who kills another's slave sins against the slave's master, and just as he sins who arrogates to himself power over something not committed to him. To God alone belongs the power over death and life, according to Deuteronomy xxxii: "I kill and I make to live."

To the first [argument that suicide is permissible], it may be objected that homicide is not only a sin against justice, but is also a sin against the charity that everyone ought to have for himself; on that ground, self-killing is a sin with respect to oneself. And with respect to the community and to God, it is a sin through its opposition to justice.

To the second, it may be objected that one with public authority may kill a criminal because he is empowered to judge him. But no one is allowed to be the judge of himself, and so one with public authority is not allowed to kill himself because of some sin, although he is allowed to commit himself to the judgment of some other.

To the third, it may be objected that man is indeed lord of himself through his free will, and so may lawfully dispose of himself as far as what pertains to this life is concerned; that much is governed by man's free will. But the passage from this life to the other, happier one is not subject to man's free will, but to divine power. Therefore, it is not permissible for a man to kill himself in order to pass over into the happier life. Neither, likewise, to avoid the present life's miseries; the "ultimate" evil of this life, and the "most frightful," is death, as the Philosopher shows in *Ethics*, Book III, and so to kill oneself to evade the other miseries of life is to assume a greater evil to avoid a less. Neither, likewise, may one kill oneself on account of some sin committed; in that case one harms oneself as much as may be, by preventing the necessary time for penitence. Besides, killing a criminal is not permitted except through the judgment of public authority. Neither, likewise, is a woman permitted to kill herself to prevent another's violating her; she ought not commit the maximal sin on herself, which is to kill herself, to avoid another, smaller sin (for it is no crime for a woman to be violated through force, without her consent, because "the body is not corrupted without the mind's consent," as Lucia said [*Golden Legend*, IV]). And it is certain that fornication and adultery are less sins than homicide, especially self-homicide, which is the gravest of all because it injures the self to which is owed the greatest love. And it is also the most dangerous, because there remains no time to expiate the sin through penance. Neither, likewise, is one allowed to kill himself in fear of consenting to sin, for "we must not do evil in order that good come from it" [Romans iii 8], or to avoid evils, especially smaller and less certain ones, for it is not inevitable that one will in the future consent to sin; God is capable, whenever temptation arises, to free man from sin.

To the fourth, it may be objected that, as Augustine says in *The City of God*, Book I, "Neither may Samson be otherwise excused for crushing himself along with his enemies in the fall of the house, except that the Holy Spirit inwardly commanded this in order to perform a miracle through him"; and he gives the same reason for certain holy women who killed themselves in time of persecution, whose memory the church celebrates.

To the fifth, it may be objected that it is fortitude when one does not shrink from suffering death inflicted by another person, in the interest of virtue and the avoidance of sin; but when one kills oneself to avoid bad punishments, it has some appearance of fortitude, on account of which certain suicides are accounted to have acted bravely, Razis among them. But this is not real fortitude, it is instead some weakness in a soul not strong enough to bear hardship, as is shown by the Philosopher in *Ethics*, Book III, and Augustine in *The City of God*, Book I.

ANGELA OF FOLIGNO (c. 1248–1309)

from *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* (expanded in Archive)

Little is known about the life of the Italian mystic Angela de Foligno. Tradition reports that she was born to a wealthy family but lost her father while still young. She married at an early age and had several sons. She had no formal education, but possessed an open mind and vigorous intelligence. She was beautiful, impetuous, and vain. After living a worldly early life—including, in the words of one of her biographers, "washing, combing . . . dressing in luxurious clothes, indulging in fancy foods . . . maligning others . . . letting loose with fits of anger and pride"—she converted to a life of contrition by confessing her guilt and shame, selling her land and possessions, and joining the Third Order of St. Francis as a Tertiary hermit. Despite the joy she found in her new life, Angela faced opposition from family and clergy. The remainder of her life was passed in seclusion (the members of her immediate family had all died by about 1288) in the area of the Church of the Friars Minor at Foligno, except for a pilgrimage to Assisi in 1291 at age 43, during which she received a vision "of God's love for her."

Angela confessed her doctrinal revelations, visions, and consolations, some of which occurred while she slept, to her scribe, Brother Arnoldo; some parts she may have recorded herself. These works were collected in The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno, *which includes a detailed account of her inner journey toward purification. The first Italian edition (translated from Latin), 1510, became one of the most popular religious works printed in the Italian vernacular and is an important specimen of medieval psychology. Her mystical writings have influenced many writers and philosophers, even to the present day.*

In the first of the two visions excerpted here, Angela vividly describes the intensity of her desire to die, much as St. Paul [q.v., New Testament: Philippians: "Paul on the Desire to Die"] had earlier written of his desire to die and be with Christ. In her second vision, which expresses a desire not unlike

St. Ignatius's [q.v.] eagerness to become "God's wheat"—a martyr ground in the teeth of wild beasts—Angela wishes fervently for a slow and agonizing death. For Angela, as for Paul and Ignatius, however, suicide is not in question and is not explicitly discussed. These writings are crucial for examining the distinctions between voluntary martyrdom and suicide in early and medieval Christianity, emphasizing as this tradition does both the martyr's promise of a personal, beatific afterlife and a thoroughgoing prohibition of suicide. One may desire intensely to die, but one must not deliberately end one's life.

Sources

Angela de Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*. Treatise III, First and Tenth Visions, tr. Mary G. Steegmann, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966, pp. 157–161, 163–168, 196–200. Text also online at http://www.archive.org/details/divineconsolatio00angeuoft. Quotations in introduction from Paul Lachance, *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, New York, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993, pp. 16–17, and Elizabeth Alvil Petroff, *The Mystics*.

from THE BOOK OF DIVINE CONSOLATION OF THE BLESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO

Of the Many Visions and Consolations Received by Angela of Foligno: First Vision and Consolation

…I was inspired and drawn unto the contemplation of the blessed union of the divinity and humanity of Christ, and in this contemplation did I feel an exceeding great delight, the which was greater than any I had ever felt heretofore. For this reason did I remain for a great part of that day standing in the cell where I was praying, astonished, locked in and alone. My heart was all wrapped up in that joy and I became as one dumb and did lose my speech. Wherefore did it happen that when my companion came she believed that I was about to die; but she did only weary me and was an hindrance unto me.

Once, before that I had finished giving all I possessed unto the poor (albeit but little then remained for me to give), when I was persevering in these matters, it chanced that one evening when I was at prayer methought I did feel nothing whatsoever of God. Wherefore I lamented and prayed unto God, saying:

"Lord, that which I do, I do only that I may find Thee; wherefore, having done it, do Thou grant me the grace that I may find Thee."

And many other similar things did I say in my prayer, and this answer was vouchsafed unto me, "What desirest thou?"

Then I said: "I desire neither gold nor silver; yea, if Thou wouldst give me the whole world I would not accept it, seeing that I desire Thee only."

Then did He say unto me, "Strive diligently and make thyself ready, for when thou hast accomplished that which thou art now doing, the whole Trinity will descend unto thee."

Many other things were also promised unto me, which did ease me of my tribulation and fill me with divine sweetness. And from that hour I did await that the thing which had been told me should be immediately fulfilled.

After this I went unto the church of Saint Francis, near unto Assisi, and the promise was fulfilled by the way as I went thither. Nevertheless, I had not yet finished giving all things unto the poor, but there was little yet remaining.

As I went unto Saint Francis, therefore, I prayed by the way. And amongst other prayers, I did ask the Blessed Francis that he would implore God for me, that I might serve well his Order, unto which I had but lately renewed my promises, and that he would obtain for me the grace that I might feel somewhat of Christ, but above all, that He would make me become poor and end my days in poverty.

Now when I was come to that place which lieth between Spello and the narrow road which leadeth upward unto Assisi, and is beyond Spello, it was said unto me:

"Thou hast prayed unto My servant Francis, and I have not willed to send thee another messenger. I am the Holy Spirit, who am come unto thee to bring thee such consolation as thou hast never before tasted. And I will go with thee even unto Saint Francis; I shall be within thee and but few of those who are with thee will perceive it. I will bear thee company and will speak with thee all the way; I will make no end to my speaking and thou wilt not be able to attend unto any save unto Me, for I have bound thee and will not depart from thee until thou comest for the second time unto Saint Francis. Then will I depart from thee in so far as this present consolation is concerned, but in no other manner will I ever leave thee, and thou shalt love Me."

Then began He to speak the following words unto me, which did persuade me to love after this manner:

"My daughter who art sweet unto Me, my daughter who art My temple; My beloved daughter, do thou love Me, for I do greatly love thee and much more than thou lovest Me." And very often did He say unto me: "Bride and daughter, sweet art thou unto Me, I love thee better than any other who is in the valley of Spolero. Forasmuch as I have rested and reposed in thee, do thou also rest thyself and repose in Me. I have been with the apostles, who did behold Me with their bodily eyes, but they did not feel Me as thou feelest Me. When thou shalt be come unto thine house thou shalt feel another sweetness, such as thou hast never yet experienced. I shall not speak unto thee as I now speak, but thou wilt only feel Me. Thou hast prayed unto My servant Francis, hoping with him and through him to obtain the things thou desirest, seeing that as my servant Francis hath greatly loved Me, I have done many things for him. If there were to-day any person who loved Me more, much more would I do for him."

Then said He unto me that there are few good persons in these days and but little faith, for which cause He did lament, saying, "So great is the love of the soul who loveth Me without sin, that, if there were any one who loved Me perfectly, I would show him greater mercy than I have ever shown hitherto, and Thou knowest that many great things are recorded which I have done unto divers persons in times past."

None can excuse themselves for not having this love, because it is possible for all persons to love God, and He asketh nothing save that the soul shall love and seek Him. He is the love of the soul. But these are deep sayings.

In the meantime I had remembered all my sins, and on my side I beheld nothing save sins and wrong-doing, so that I did feel greater humility than I had ever felt before. Then did He tell me that I was beloved, that the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary had inclined Himself unto me and was come to speak with me. Wherefore Christ said unto me:—

"If all the world came now unto thee, thou couldst not speak with others; for when I come unto thee, there cometh more than all the world." But in order to calm my doubts He said: "I am

He who was crucified for thee, and for thy sake did I endure hunger and thirst, and so greatly have I loved thee that I did shed My blood for thee," and He expounded unto me all His Passion and said: "Ask mercy for thyself and for thy companions and for all whom thou wilt, for I am much more ready to give than thou art to receive."

Then did my soul cry aloud, saying, "I will not ask, for I am not worthy and I remember all my sins!" And it said further, "If Thou who hast spoken with me from the beginning wert truly the Holy Spirit, Thou wouldst not have told me such great things; and if Thou wert verily within me, then my joy would be so great that I could not bear it and live."

I can never describe the joy and sweetness which I felt, especially when He said, "I am the Holy Spirit who am entering into thee;" but briefly, great was the sweetness which I received at each one of His sayings.

In this manner, therefore, I did arrive at Saint Francis', as He had foretold. And He departed not from me, but remained with me, even when I sat down to meat, until I went unto Saint Francis' for the second time.

When I did bend my knees upon entering in at the door of the church, I immediately beheld a picture of Saint Francis lying in Christ's bosom. Then said Christ unto me:—

"Thus closely will I hold thee, and so much closer that bodily eyes can neither perceive nor comprehend it. But now, My beloved daughter and temple of My delight, the hour is come when I must fill thee with My spirit and must leave thee. I have told thee that because of this consolation I must leave thee; nevertheless, if thou lovest Me, I will not leave thee."

Albeit the words were bitter, yet were they full of joy. Then looked I, that I might behold with the eyes of both body and mind. And I beheld; and if thou seekest to know what I beheld, truly I can only say that it was a thing full of great majesty; and more than this can I not say, save that it seemed unto me to be full of all goodness. Then He departed with great gentleness; not suddenly, but slowly and gradually. . . .

. . . Then cried my soul, "If only Thou wilt not leave me, I will commit no mortal sin!"

And He answered me, "That say I not unto thee." Then as He was departing, I did ask a blessing for my companion, and He replied, "Unto her will I give another blessing," and so He departed. And at His departure He would not that I should prostrate myself before Him, but that I should stand upon my feet. But after that He was gone I fell down upon a seat and began to cry with a loud voice, clamouring and calling without any shame and uttering these words, "Oh Love, heretofore have I never known Thee, why leavest Thou me in this manner?" And more than this I could not Say, for my voice was so suffocated with crying that scarce could I pronounce even this, wherefore was it not heard by the persons around me.

This clamouring and crying did come upon me as I entered into the door of the church of Saint Francis. Here was I overwhelmed again and began to make a noise and call aloud in the presence of all the people, that those who were come with me and did know me did stand afar off and were ashamed, believing that I did it for another reason. So was I left with the certainty that it was God who had spoken with me; and because of His sweetness and the grief of His departure did I cry aloud, desiring to die. And seeing that I did not die, the grief of being separated from Him was so great that all the joints of my limbs did fall asunder.

When I was returned I stayed within the house, and I felt a sweetness so peaceful, quiet, and great that I know not how to describe it. Wherefore did I long for death, and because of the aforesaid peace and sweet joyfulness was life a greater grief unto me than I can say. I longed for death that I might attain unto that delight of the which I now felt something, and because of this

did I wish to depart from this world. Life was a greater grief unto me than had been the deaths of my mother and my children, more heavy than any other grief of which I can bethink me.

Thus did I remain eight days within the house, all feeble. And I cried, "Lord, have mercy upon me and grant that I may remain no longer in this world." From this time forth I was often aware of indescribable odours; but these and other things can I not explain, so great was the sweetness and joy which I did feel in them. The voice spake unto me many other times, but never at any great length, nor with so much sweetness or deep meaning.

Tenth Vision and Consolation

Upon another occasion whilst I was at prayer, exceeding pleasant words were spoken unto me after this manner:

"Oh my daughter, who art far sweeter unto Me than I am unto thee; thou art the temple of My delight, and the heart of the Omnipotent God resteth upon thy heart."

Together with these words there came upon me a feeling of the utmost joy, such as I had never before experienced, inasmuch as all the members of my body felt it. And as I did prostrate myself at these words, it was further told me:

"The Omnipotent God loveth thee more dearly than any other woman of this city. He rejoiceth in thee and in thy companion. De ye both strive, therefore, that your lives be as a light unto all who desire to follow your example; but unto those who follow you not, shall your lives be as a judgment strict and hard. . . ."

. . . This shall be a certain sign unto thee that I am He, because none save I can do this. And this is a sign which I will leave in thy soul, the which is better for thee than that which thou didst ask of Me. My love do I leave in thee, so that for love of Me thou wilt endure tribulations, and if any person speak or do evil unto thee thou wilt be grateful, declaring thyself unworthy of so much mercy. Such is the love which I bare unto you all, for whose sake I patiently and humbly endured all things. Thus thou shalt know whether or not I am in thee if, when any person shall speak or do evil unto thee, thou art not only patient, but even desirous that they should hurt thee and be grateful unto them. And this is a certain sign of the grace of God. And behold, I do now anoint thee with an ointment wherewith a saint called Siricus and many other saints were anointed."

Then did I immediately feel that ointment, and so sweet was it that I longed for death, and that I might die with all manner of bodily torments. The torments suffered by the martyrs who had died for Christ did I esteem as naught, and I desired that for love of Him my torments should be more terrible than theirs, and that the world should cry out upon me with insults and revilings.

Moreover, I rejoiced greatly in praying for those who might work me these evils, and I marveled not at the saints who prayed for their murderers and prosecutors; for not only ought we to pray unto God for them, but we should beseech Him to grant them especial grace. Therefore was I ready to pray for those who did me evil, to love them with a great love, and to take compassion upon them. In that anointing I did feel such sweetness both within and without that I never felt the like before, and I have no words wherewith I can show forth the least part of it.

This consolation was different, and of a nature unlike the others. For in the others I had desired immediately to quit this world, but in this my desire was that my death should be grievous and prolonged, with all manner of torments, and that my members should suffer all the tortures of the world. Yet all this seemed but a small thing unto me, for my soul knew well that every torment was but a small thing in comparison with the blessings promised in the life eternal.

My soul knew of a certainty that it was thus, and if all the wise men of the world had told me the contrary, I should not have believed them. And if I should swear that all who walked upon the aforesaid way would be saved, I should believe that I spake the truth.

This sign did God leave so firmly implanted in my soul, with so bright and clear a light, that methinketh I could endure any martyrdom. This sign, moreover, leadeth continually upon the straight way of salvation, that is to say, it leadeth unto love and the desire to suffer for love of God.

IBN BATTUTA (1304–1368/69)

from *Rihla: On Sati and Religious Suicide*

Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Batutah, known as Ibn Battuta or sometimes Battuta, was born to a Berber family of Islamic legal scholars in Tangier, Morocco. He is known for the extent of his travels over 30 years, setting the record for distance journeyed by an individual until the advent of the Steam Age 450 years later. From the time he left to perform the hajj *at age 21, Ibn Battuta's travels took him through most of the Islamic world, North, West, and East Africa, and as far as South and Central Asia, including China in the east and Southern and Eastern Europe in the west.*

Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco in 1354 and an oral account of his experience was collected by scholar Ibn Juzayy and adapted into a narrative entitled A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling*, commonly known as the* Rihla*, meaning "journey." The traditional* rihla *was centered around visits to the holy places of Arabia; only after, and due to Ibn Battuta's travels, did "*rihla*" come to mean travels throughout the world.*

Ibn Battuta describes in the Rihla *that it was first from a passing man in Pakpattan, now in Pakistan, that he was first told of* sati*, the suicide of a Hindu widow on the pyre of her husband. Ibn Battuta describes noticing later processions of individual Hindu women on horseback, followed by "both Muslims and infidels" on the way to funerals. He wrote that the ritual was voluntary on the surface, but that a widow who declined would be "despised" and live on "with her own people in misery." Ibn Battuta goes on to describe a* sati *ritual of three women that he himself witnessed, and relates that while the men preparing the ritual held a blanket in front of the fire so as not to frighten the approaching women, one of the women tore the blanket away and said, smiling, "Do you frighten me with the fire? I know that it is a fire, so let me alone."*

In analogy to sati*, Ibn Battuta adds religious suicide in the Ganges and quotes a typical man preparing to enter the water: "Do not think that I drown myself for any worldly reason or through penury; my purpose is solely to seek approach to Kusay," which Ibn Battuta cites as meaning God.*

Source

Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*, tr. H. A. R. Gibb, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929 (1983 reprint), pp. 190–193.

from RIHLA: ON SATI AND RELIGIOUS SUICIDE

The first town we reached after leaving Multan was Abuhar [Abohar], which is the first town in India proper, and thence we entered a plain extending for a day's journey. On the borders of this plain are inaccessible mountains, inhabited by Hindu infidels; some of them are subjects under Muslim rule, and live in villages governed by a Muslim headman appointed by the governor in whose fief the village lies. Others of them are rebels and warriors, who maintain themselves in the fastnesses of the mountains and make plundering raids. On this road we fell in with a raiding party, this being the first engagement I witnessed in India. The main party had left Abuhar in the early morning, but I had stayed there with a small party of my companions until midday and when we left, numbering in all twenty-two horsemen, partly Arabs and partly Persians and Turks, we were attacked on this plain by eighty infidels on foot with two horsemen. My companions were men of courage and ability and we fought stoutly with them, killing one of the horsemen and about twelve of the footsoldiers. I was hit by an arrow and my horse by another, but God preserved me from them, for there is no force in their arrows. One of our party had his horse wounded, but we gave him in exchange the horse we had captured from the infidel, and killed the wounded horse, which was eaten by the Turks of our party. We carried the heads of the slain to the castle of Abu Bak'har, which we reached about midnight, and suspended them from the wall.

Two days later we reached Ajudahan [Pakpattan], a small town belonging to the pious Shaykh Farid ad-Din. As I returned to the camp after visiting this personage, I saw the people hurrying out, and some of our party along with them. I asked them what was happening and they told me that one of the Hindu infidels had died, that a fire had been kindled to burn him, and his wife would burn herself along with him. After the burning my companions came back and told me that she had embraced the dead man until she herself was burned with him. Later on I used often to see a Hindu woman, richly dressed, riding on horseback, followed by both Muslims and infidels and preceded by drums and trumpets; she was accompanied by Brahmans, who are the chiefs of the Hindus. In the sultan's dominions they ask his permission to burn her, which he accords them. The burning of the wife after her husband's death is regarded by them as a commendable act, but is not compulsory; only when a widow burns herself her family acquires a certain prestige by it and gains a reputation for fidelity. A widow who does not burn herself dresses in coarse garments and lives with her own people in misery, despised for her lack of fidelity, but she is not forced to burn herself. Once in the town of Amjari [Amjhera, near Dhar] I saw three women whose husbands had been killed in battle and who had agreed to burn themselves. Each one had a horse brought to her and mounted it, richly dressed and perfumed. In her right hand she held a coconut, with which she played, and in her left a mirror, in which she looked at her face. They were surrounded by Brahmans and their own relatives, and were preceded by drums, trumpets and bugles. Every one of the infidels said to them "Take greetings from me to my father, or brother or mother, or friend" and they would say "Yes" and smile at them. I rode out with my companions to see the way in which the burning was carried out. After three miles we came to a dark place with much water and shady trees, amongst which there were four pavilions, each containing a stone idol. Between the pavilions there was a basin of water over which

a dense shade was cast by trees so thickly set that the sun could not penetrate them. The place looked like a spot in hell—God preserve us from it! On reaching these pavilions they descended to the pool, plunged into it and divested themselves of their clothes and ornaments, which they distributed as alms. Each one was then given an unsewn garment of coarse cotton and tied part of it round her waist and part over her head and shoulders. The fires had been lit near this basin in a low lying spot, and oil of sesame poured over them, so that the flames were increased. There were about fifteen men there with faggots of thin wood and about ten others with heavy pieces of wood, and the drummers and trumpeters were standing by waiting for the woman's coming. The fire was screened off by a blanket held by some men, so that she should not be frightened by the sight of it. I saw one of them, on coming to the blanket, pull it violently out of the men's hands, saying to them with a smile "Do you frighten me with the fire? I know that it is a fire, so let me alone." Thereupon she joined her hands above her head in salutation to the fire and cast herself into it. At the same moment the drums, trumpets and bugles were sounded, the men threw their firewood on her and the others put the heavy wood on top of her to prevent her moving, cries were raised and there was a loud clamour. When I saw this I had all but fallen off my horse, if my companions had not quickly brought water to me and laved my face, after which I withdrew.

The Indians have a similar practice of drowning themselves and many of them do so in the river Ganges, the river to which they go on pilgrimage, and into which the ashes of those who are burned are cast. They say that it is a river of Paradise. When one of them comes to drown himself he says to those present with him, "Do not think that I drown myself for any worldly reason or through penury; my purpose is solely to seek approach to Kusay," Kusay being the name of God in their language. He then drowns himself and when he is dead they take him out and burn him and cast his ashes into this river.

THOMAS MORE (1478–1535)

from *Utopia*

from *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (expanded in Archive)

Born in London, the son of a prominent judge, Thomas More was educated at Oxford and Lincoln's Inn, where he studied law. His humanist philosophy was influenced by his wide reading from scripture, the Church Fathers, classical literature, and the new learning of the Renaissance, as well as by his friendship with the noted philosopher and scholar Desiderius Erasmus. More spent some years in personal debate as he considered taking the priesthood at a Carthusian monastery; by the time of his election to parliament in 1504 and his first marriage in 1505, he had decided to live as a lay Christian. After some experience with trade negotiations, he was elected an undersheriff in 1510, a position that brought him recognition for his oratorical skills, as well as his impartiality and fairness in public affairs. In 1513, he began work on

his historical narrative, The History of Richard III, *to which William Shakespeare [q.v] is indebted, in Latin and English, and he wrote a series of Latin poems celebrating Henry VIII"s accession to the throne.*

More's best known work is Utopia *(1516), which attacks unjust economic and social conditions in Europe and depicts an ideal communal state founded upon principles of reason. The book was an immediate success; its intelligent, ironic commentary on a variety of controversial issues established More's reputation as a leading humanist. More's later writings include numerous religious essays defending the Roman Catholic Church against the writings of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers and heretics.*

More's success in public and foreign negotiations led to his appointment in the royal service. In 1518, he joined the king's council; he was knighted in 1521; and a series of honors and responsibilities led to his appointment as Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523. In 1529, More was named to the position of Lord Chancellor, the realm's highest office, succeeding Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. He resigned in 1532, in part because of ill health, but also because he saw that Henry VIII must break with Rome if he were to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. He refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, which would impugn the pope's spiritual authority and grant the king authority over the English church, and was charged with high treason. He was beheaded on July 6, 1535; his head was displayed on the London Bridge. He was canonized in 1935.

In the selection from Utopia, *More outlines the place of suicide in a rational, non-Christian society; it might be described as "encouraged suicide" for the hopelessly ill—but only after full medical care has been provided. Suicide in hopeless or terminal illness is never to be forced; suicide without official approval is rejected.*

In A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation *(1557), written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1534–35, More uses the form of a lengthy dialogue between an older uncle, Anthony, and his nephew Vincent to distinguish between two types of suicide, one the result of pusillanimity or cowardice, and the other the result of boldness and pride. The latter case leads to a discussion of how to distinguish the devil's illusions from true spiritual revelations. In this discussion, More is confronting Augustine's justification of certain Biblical suicides, such as Samson, as a response to God's direct command; here, More raises the question of how someone who feels that he is being directed to kill himself can know whether he is being tempted by the devil or commanded by God. He is particularly concerned with the ways in which the devil exploits personality traits, determined by bodily "humors," to instill suicidal obsessions, casting erosive self-torment into the mind of the melancholic, or self-destructive fury into the choleric temperament. The central section of the* Dialogue *is organized to respond to the fears itemized in Psalm 91:5, "You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday," though there is no evidence that More himself was suicidal or was tempted to suicide, even while in the Tower of London awaiting execution. To be sure, he had deliberately chosen a course of action—refusal to sign the oath that Henry VIII demanded—almost certain to lead to his death. But as Frank Manley points out, More may have been uncertain of whether his choice could be evidence of spiritual pride—the same sort of temptation by the devil that, More believed, led so many others to suicide. More's advice for dissuading a potential suicide from the act, in which he recommends both a "physician for the body" and a "physician for the soul," shows a conception of suicide as partly due to psychophysiological causes.*

Sources

Thomas More, *Utopia,* Book II, tr. Ralph Robinson, in *Three Early Modern Utopias,* ed. Susan Bruce. Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 89–90; Thomas More, *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation With*

Modifications to Obsolete Language, from chs. XV, XVI, ed. Monica Stevens, IndyPublish.com, 2005, available online at www.gutenberg.org from Project Gutenberg, text # 17075. Quotations in introduction from *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, ed. Frank Manley, New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1977, p. xxxii.

from UTOPIA

Of Sick Persons

The sick (as I said) they see to with great affection, and let nothing at all pass concerning either physic or good diet, whereby they may be restored again to their health. Such as be sick of incurable diseases they comfort with sitting by them, with talking with them, and, to be short, with all manner of helps that may be. But if the disease be not only incurable, but also full of continual pain and anguish, then the priests and the magistrates exhort the man (seeing he is not able to do any duty of life, and by overliving his own death is noisome and irksome to other and grievous to himself), that he will determine with himself no longer to cherish that pestilent and painful disease. And, seeing his life is to him but a torment, that he will not be unwilling to die, but rather take a good hope to him, and either dispatch himself out of that painful life, as out of a prison or a rack of torment, or else suffer himself willingly to be rid out of it by other. And in so doing they tell him he shall do wisely, seeing by his death he shall lose no commodity, but end his pain. And because in that act he shall follow the counsel of the priests, that is to say, of the interpreters of God's will and pleasure, they show him that he shall do like a godly and a virtuous man. They that be thus persuaded finish their lives willingly, either with hunger, or else die in their sleep without any feeling of death. But they cause none such to die against his will, nor they use no less diligence and attendance about him, believing this to be an honourable death. Else he that killeth himself before that the priests and the council have allowed the cause of his death, him as unworthy either to be buried or with fire to be consumed, they cast unburied into some stinking marsh.

from A DIALOGUE OF COMFORT AGAINST TRIBULATION

VINCENT: Verily, good uncle, you have in my mind well declared these kinds of the night's fear.

ANTHONY: Surely, cousin, but yet are there many more than I can either remember or find. . . . That is, cousin, where the devil tempteth a man to kill and destroy himself.

VINCENT: Undoubtedly this kind of tribulation is marvellous and strange. And the temptation is of such a sort that some men have the opinion that those who once fall into that fantasy can never fully cast it off.

ANTHONY: . . . But the thing that maketh men so to say is that, of those who finally do destroy themselves, there is much speech and much wondering, as it is well worthy. But many a good man and woman hath sometime—yea, for some years, once after another—continually been tempted to do it, and yet hath, by grace and good counsel, well and virtuously withstood that temptation, and been in conclusion clearly delivered of it. And their tribulation is not known abroad and therefore not talked of.

But surely, cousin, a horrible sore trouble it is to any man or woman whom the devil tempteth with that temptation. Many have I heard of, and with some have I talked myself, who have been sore cumbered with it, and I have marked not a little the manner of them.

VINCENT: I pray you, good uncle, show me somewhat of such things as you perceive therein. For first, whereas you call the kind of temptation the daughter of pusillanimity and thereby so near of kin to the night's fear, me thinketh on the other hand that it is rather a thing that cometh of a great courage and boldness. For they dare with their own hands to put themselves to death, from which we see almost every man shrink and flee, and many of them we know by good proof and plain experience for men of great heart and excellent bold courage.

ANTHONY: I said, Cousin Vincent, that of pusillanimity cometh this temptation, and very truth it is that indeed so it doth. But yet I meant not that only of faint heart and fear it cometh and growth always. For the devil tempteth sundry folk by sundry ways. . . .

. . . But, as I was about to tell you, strength of heart and courage are there none in that deed, not only because true strength (as it hath the name of virtue in a reasonable creature) can never be without prudence, but also because, as I said, even in them that seem men of most courage, it shall well appear to them that well weigh the matter that the mind whereby they be led to destroy themselves groweth of pusillanimity and very foolish fear.

Take for example Cato of Utica, who in Africa killed himself after the great victory that Julius Caesar had. St. Austine [Augustine] well declareth in his work *De civitate Dei* [*The City of God*] that there was no strength nor magnanimity in his destruction of himself, but plain pusillanimity and impotency of stomach. For he was forced to do it because his heart was too feeble to bear the beholding of another man's glory or the suffering of other worldly calamities that he feared should fall on himself. So that, as St. Austine well proveth, that horrible deed is no act of strength, but an act of a mind either drawn from the consideration of itself with some fiendish fancy, in which the man hath need to be called home with good counsel; or else oppressed by faint heart and fear, in which a good part of the counsel must stand in lifting up his courage with good consolation and comfort. . . .

. . . [T]aking the scripture of God for a ground for this matter, you know very well yourself that you shall go somewhat a shorter way to work if you ask this question of him: Since God hath forbidden once the thing himself, though he may dispense with it if he will, yet since the devil may feign himself God and with a marvellous vision delude one, and make as though God did it; and since the devil is also more likely to speak against God's commandment than God against his own; you shall have good cause, I say, to demand of the man himself whereby he knoweth that his vision is God's true revelation and not the devil's false delusion. . . .

VINCENT: Yet then this religious man of whom we speak, when I show him the scripture against his revelation and therefore call it an illusion, may bid me with reason go mind

my own affairs. For he knoweth well and surely himself that his revelation is very good and true and not any false illusion, since for all the general commandment of God in the scripture, God may dispense where he will and when he will, and may command him to do the contrary. For he commanded Abraham to kill his own son, and Sampson had, by inspiration of God, commandment to kill himself by pulling down the house upon his own head at the feast of the Philistines.

Now, if I would then do as you bade me right now, tell him that such apparitions may be illusions, and since God's word is in the scripture against him plain for the prohibition, he must perceive the truth of his revelation whereby I may know it is not a false illusion. . . .

ANTHONY: This is well said, cousin, but yet could he not escape you so. For the dispensation of God's common precept, which dispensation he must say that he hath by his private revelation, is a thing of such sort as showeth itself naught and false. For it never hath any example like, since the world began until now, that ever man hath read or heard of, among faithful people commended.

First, as for Abraham, concerning the death of his son: God intended it not, but only tempted the towardness of the father's obedience. As for Sampson, all men make not the matter very sure whether he be saved or not, but yet therein some matter and cause appeareth. For the Philistines being enemies of God and using Sampson for their mocking-stock in scorn of God, it is well likely that God gave him the mind to bestow his own life upon the revenging of the displeasure that those blasphemous Philistines did unto God. And that appeareth clear enough by this: that though his strength failed him when he lacked his hair, yet had he not, it seemeth, that strength evermore at hand while he had his hair, but only at such times as it pleased God to give it to him. This thing appeareth by these words, that the scripture in some place of that matter saith, "The power or might of God rushed into Sampson." And so therefore, since this thing that he did in the pulling down of the house was done by the special gift of strength then at that point given him by God, it well declareth that the strength of God, and with it the spirit of God, entered into him for it.

St. Austine also rehearseth that certain holy virtuous virgins, in time of persecution, being pursued by God's enemies the infidels to be deflowered by force, ran into a water and drowned themselves rather than be bereaved of their virginity. And, albeit that he thinketh it is not lawful for any other maid to follow their example, but that she should suffer another to do her any manner of violence by force and commit sin of his own upon her against her will, rather than willingly and thereby sinfully herself to become a homicide of herself; yet he thinketh that in them it happened by the special instinct of the spirit of God, who, for causes seen to himself, would rather that they should avoid it with their own temporal death than abide the defiling and violation of their chastity.

But now this good man neither hath any of God's enemies to be revenged on by his own death, nor any woman who violently pursues him to bereave him by force of his virginity! And we never find that God proved any man's obedient mind by the commandment of his own slaughter of himself. Therefore is both his case plainly against God's open precept, and the dispensation strange and without example, no cause appearing nor well imaginable. Unless he would think that God could neither any longer live without him, nor could take him to him in such wise as he doth other men, but must command him to come by a forbidden way, by which, without other cause, we never heard that ever he bade any man else before. . . .

VINCENT: I think, uncle, that folk fall into this ungracious mind, through the devil's temptation, by many more means than one.

ANTHONY: That is, cousin, very true. For the devil taketh his occasions as he seeth them fall convenient for him. Some he stirreth to it for weariness of themselves after some great loss, some for fear of horrible bodily harm, and some (as I said) for fear of worldly shame. . . .

Some have, with holding a knife in their hand, suddenly thought upon the killing of themselves, and forthwith, in devising what a horrible thing it would be if they should mishap to do so, have fallen into a fear that they would do so indeed. And they have, with long and often thinking thereon, imprinted that fear so sore in their imagination, that some of them have not afterwards cast it off without great difficulty. And some could never in their life be rid of it, but have afterward in conclusion miserably done it indeed. But like as, where the devil useth the blood of a man's own body toward his purpose in provoking him to lechery, the man must and doth with grace and wisdom resist it; so must the man do whose melancholy humours and devil abuseth, toward the casting of such a desperate dread into his heart.

VINCENT: I pray you, uncle, what advice would be to be given him in such a case?

ANTHONY: Surely, me thinketh his help standeth in two things: counsel and prayer.

First, as concerning counsel: Like as it may be that he hath two things that hold him in his temptation; that is, some evil humours of his own body, and the cursed devil that abuseth them to his pernicious purpose, so must he needs against them twain the counsel of two manner of folk; that is, physicians for the body and physicians for the soul. The bodily physician shall consider what abundance of these evil humours the man hath, that the devil maketh his instruments, in moving the man toward that fearful affection. And he shall proceed by fitting diet and suitable medicines to resist them, as well as by purgations to disburden the body of them.

Let no man think it strange that I would advise a man to take counsel for the body, in such spiritual suffering. For since the body and the soul are so knit and joined together that they both make between them one person, the distemperance of either one engendereth sometimes the distemperance of both twain. And therefore I would advise every man in every sickness of the body to be shriven and to seek of a good spiritual physician the sure health of his soul. For this shall not only serve against peril that may peradventure grow further by that sickness than in the beginning men think were likely, but the comfort of it (and God's favour increasing with it) shall also do the body good. For this cause the blessed apostle St. James exhorteth men in their bodily sickness to call in the priests, and saith that it shall do them good both in body and soul. So likewise would I sometimes advise some men, in some sickness of the soul, besides their spiritual leech, to take also some counsel of the physician for the body. . . .

The manner of the fight against temptation must stand in three things: that is, in resisting, and in contemning, and in the invocation of help. . . .

. . . And I doubt not, by God's grace, but that he who in such a temptation will use good counsel and prayer and keep himself in good virtuous business and good virtuous company and abide in the faithful hope of God's help, he shall have the truth of God (as the prophet saith in the verse afore rehearsed) so compass him about with a shield that he shall not need to dread this night's fear of this wicked temptation.

And thus will I finish this piece of the night's fear. . . .

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

from *Table Talk*

The German religious reformer, Martin Luther, was born in Saxony, the son of a prosperous but strict entrepreneur and local politician. In 1505, Luther received a master's degree from the University of Erfurt, one of Germany's finest schools. According to his father's wishes, he began to study law, but that same year, after being thrown to the ground from his horse during a violent thunderstorm, he vowed that he would become a monk if he survived. He was ordained to the priesthood in an Augustinian monastery in 1507, and in 1512, received his doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg. During this time, Luther, who suffered from depression, underwent an internal, spiritual crisis. He felt that no matter how well he lived his life, he was unable to please God. Out of this crisis was, he fashioned the essential theology of Protestantism: Faith, not good works, is the key to salvation.

In 1517, outraged by the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences, or pardons that seemed to Luther to permit those who had sinned to buy their way out of punishment, he posted his famous "Ninety-Five Theses" on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. The Theses were widely distributed and aroused strong public reaction. He also published other works attacking the papal system as a whole, including his famous "Address to the Christian Nobles of Germany" (1520) and his treatise On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church *(1520). Luther was called upon to recant his views, including his denial of the supremacy of the pope, but he refused, burning the papal bull in public. He was excommunicated in January of 1521. That spring, he was summoned to the Imperial Diet at Worms; again he refused to recant, holding that his position was supported by Scripture; the Edict of Worms declared him an outlaw and banned his writings. In the next years, under the protection of Frederick of Saxony, Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German, a project that would prove to be of central importance to both the standardization of the German language and the consolidation of the Protestant Reformation.*

Following the German Peasants' War, the Augustinian friars abandoned the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. In 1524, it was opened to Luther, his wife Katherine von Bora, a former nun whom he married in 1525, and their six children. For the rest of his life, Luther continued to teach and write, and in 1534, 12 years after his New Testament translation, he published a translation of the entire Bible, including the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. His works also include many letters, sermons, lectures, scriptural commentaries, catechisms, and hymns. On February 17, 1546, he suffered a heart attack and died the next day.

Luther's theology, based largely on his studies of the New Testament and St. Augustine, changed the course of Western religious history. His turn from canon law to scripture as the center of faith, the justification of man by faith, and the belief in the priesthood of all Christians tried to move the Church away from the bureaucracy of the established clergy; it established not only Protestantism as a result of the Reformation, but found further effect in the Counterreformation within the Catholic Church.

The selection presented here is a group of three short notes drawn from different parts of the so-called Table Talk *(1566). Luther frequently entertained visitors at dinner, and the opinions he articulated on these occasions were often noted by his visitors. The* Table Talk *was later assembled from different note-takers; over the years, more than a score of men had taken notes at Luther's dinner table. In the short notes presented here, Luther comments on the etiology and consequences of suicide, and although he attributes suicide to the power of the devil, he insists that this does not entail that the victim is damned.*

Sources

Luther, Martin, Table Talk entries DLXXXIX, DCCXXXVIII, in *The Table Talk or Familiar Discourse of Martin Luther*, tr. William Hazlitt, London: David Bogue, 1848, pp. 254, 303; entry 222 (April 7, 1532), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Vol. 54, ed. and tr. Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 29.

from TABLE TALK

It is very certain that, as to all persons who have hanged themselves, or killed themselves in any other way, 'tis the devil who has put the cord round their necks, or the knife to their throats.

Mention was made of a young girl who, to avoid violence offered her by a nobleman, threw herself from the window, and was killed. It was asked, was she responsible for her death? Doctor Luther said: No: she felt that this step formed her only chance of safety, it being not her life she sought to save, but her chastity.

I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter, and I recommend that the popular custom be strictly adhered to according to which it [the suicide's corpse] is not carried over the threshold, etc. Such persons do not die by free choice or by law, but our Lord God will dispatch them as he executes a person through a robber. Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence he must teach us in this way.

FRANCISCO DE VITORIA (c. 1483/92–1546)

from *Lecture on Homicide* (expanded in Archive)

Commentary on [Thomas Aquinas] Summa Theologiae 2A 2 AE, Q64, A.5 (in Archive only)

Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican theologian and writer on a wide range of topics, was one of the most influential thinkers in 16th-century Catholic Europe. Born to a Basque family in Burgos, he became a member of the Dominican convent of San Pablo in about 1504. From 1509 to 1523, he studied and lectured at the University of Paris, returning to Spain to teach at the College of Saint Gregorio

at Valladolid. In 1526, he secured the most honored academic position in Spain, the prima chair of Theology at Salamanca University. Despite his considerable originality, Vitoria published none of his own works, and most of his original lectures have been lost, surviving only in notes taken by students.

*To Vitoria, theology included the study of all things under divine, as well as natural, law; he strove to create a moral philosophy compatible with natural law theory by interpreting the works of Aristotle [q.v.] and Thomas Aquinas [q.v.]. Vitoria has been variously called "the father of international law" and "the founder of global political philosophy," thanks to his conception of a "commonwealth of the whole world" (*res publica totius orbis*), though his position may be closer to the traditional* jus gentium*, the law of nations, than to modern international law. Vitoria's most influential writings deal with papal, civil, and monarchical power and the ethics of Spanish colonization in the Americas, especially with respect to the rights of the native population. Vitoria is also credited with restoring theological studies in Renaissance Spain through his writing and teaching. He inspired the next generation of Spanish jurists and theologians, including Soto, Molina, and Suárez. He died in 1546 after a long period of suffering.*

Vitoria's two principal types of works are his lectures to students (preserved through their notations) and a series of relectiones*, formal lectures annually delivered to the entire university and preserved in manuscript form. Vitoria's work in both categories formed the most extensive commentaries on suicide up to that time. This collection includes his* Commentary on Summa Theologiae, 2a 2ae, q.64, a.5 *of Thomas Aquinas and his subsequent* relectio *"On Homicide" (lecture delivered 1530, published 1557), which explores many of the same arguments at much more substantial length. Vitoria employs the same argumentative format that had been used by Aquinas—beginning by stating the conclusion, then adducing arguments against the conclusion, and only then rebutting them to confirm the conclusion. Vitoria's argument, which begins with a sustained exploration of natural human inclination, analyzes a variety of cases that may seem to challenge Aquinas's position against taking one's own life (among them, failure to defend oneself against lethal attack, sacrificing one's own share of bread to save another, leaping from a lifeboat to save the others in it, submitting to capital punishment when one might escape, killing oneself to avoid sexual violation, and the like), and then asserts Vitoria's answers to these objections. Particularly important are specific cases, like that of Samson, which pose challenges to the accepted theological view that suicide is always wrong. Vitoria's central concern is with the intention under which an act is done: Suicide is never licit if the intention is to kill oneself. However, one may lawfully kill oneself as a foreseen, though unintended, consequence of another intended act: Samson pulled the temple down on the Philistines, whom he intended to kill, but also on himself, whom he did not intend to kill, although he foresaw that his death would occur. In an argument that would become ubiquitous among Christian theologians in the context of suicide, Vitoria appeals to Aquinas's principle of "double effect," a principle used in medical ethics to distinguish between palliation and physician-assisted suicide: The physician gives a dying patient opiates to relieve pain, foreseeing—but not intending—that the drug may also hinder respiration and cause the patient's death. Vitoria uses double-effect reasoning in examining whether one has an obligation to try to prolong one's own life, to avoid all but the healthiest foods, to drink wine instead of water if one would live ten years longer, or to use expensive medicines in terminal illness.*

Sources

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Francisco de Vitoria, *Relection On Homicide & Commentary on Summa Theologiae IIa IIae Q. 64 (Thomas Aquinas)*. Tr. John P. Doyle. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997, pp. 169–185.

from LECTURE ON HOMICIDE

. . . The first proposition: Just as it is always sinful to commit suicide, so is it often a counsel, and sometimes a commandment, not only to suffer death patiently, but also to submit to it freely. . . .

. . . To kill oneself violates the commandment in the Decalogue, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20, Deut. 5), and is therefore a mortal sin. So argues St. Augustine in *De Trinitate* 1, to prove that suicide is unlawful. But to show more clearly the force of this argument, it is necessary to examine what precisely is forbidden by the commandment, for it does not explicitly say it is wrong to kill oneself. . . . How absolute is the commandment? In many cases it is lawful to kill, hence we properly ask what sorts of killing the commandment forbids. Some interpret the commandment as absolute, a prohibition of killing any person, whether a criminal or an innocent, whether by public authority or private. But in divine and general law, exceptions are recognized. . . .

. . . A person may be killed in two ways. One way is by deliberate intention, as when a judge condemns a malefactor to death. The other way is unintentional. I do not mean by this only an accidental killing, but also a voluntary one in which the killer seeks some end that might be achieved without the killing, as in self-defense or the killing of a night thief whom one would not kill if he could defend himself otherwise. . . . Only homicide in conformity with natural and divine law is lawful for a polity, through its magistrates and rulers responsible to the polity.

. . . I do say that private persons are always forbidden to kill another intentionally, because they are not authorized to protect the public welfare. Finally, I conclude that all other intentional homicide is forbidden by the commandment, whether for a public or private person, except in the permitted situation where the life of a criminal is harmful to the polity. About unintentional homicide, whether in defense of self or of the polity, there is dispute. . . .

. . . From the above discussion, it appears plain that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" makes suicide unlawful. Because no one is allowed to be judge of himself, neither does anyone have public authority over himself, taking one's own life is never permissible, even if one deserves death as one harmful to the polity.

. . . I say that is never lawful to shorten one's life, but . . . the difference between shortening a life and simply not prolonging it must be considered. Also to be considered is that, if a person is obliged not to abrupt his life, still, he is not obliged to use all lawful means to prolong it. It is clear that if one learns that the weather in India is milder and healthier such to make him live longer than he would in his own country, he is not obliged to sail to India, neither must he move from one city to another more healthy. Nor does God ask that we have a care for long life. Similarly with foods; some are improper because harmful to a person's health, and to eat them would be to kill oneself. I speak not only of poisons, but also of other noxious foods like fungi, raw or acerbic herbs, and such like. Some foods may be less healthy than others but do not endanger life, like fish, eggs, and water. We ought, I think, to observe common experience. Many more youths die of luxurious excesses than from penitential fasts; gluttony kills more people than the sword. From all this, I conclude that it is not lawful to shorten one's life by eating unhealthy foods. But neither is a man obliged to eat the best foods. . . . Nor must he drink wine if a physician tells him he would live ten years longer on wine than on water. Drinking water is not lethal, nor does it shorten life; it simply does not prolong it, but one is not obliged to prolong life. This applies to

the healthy and strong, since there are foods that are unhealthy and harmful to the ill that would be good for the healthy. Hence it is not lawful for the ill to eat them. . . .

. . . a person is not obligated to use all means to preserve his life; it is enough if he uses only the moral and appropriate means. Thus in the case proposed, I do not believe that a man must give up his entire patrimony to save his life. If there is a remedy for his sickness, the one who denies him that remedy is a homicide. From this we infer that if someone is terminally ill, and a certain expensive medicine might prolong his life for some hours, or even some days, he is not obliged to take it; it suffices if he takes only the usual medicines, and he is any case moribund.

. . . I say that life itself is the greatest good, greater than temporal goods like glory, honor, and fame. It is said that a man will give all things he possesses for life, for all these things are arranged to serve the purpose of human life. Whence Solomon says, "Have a care for your good name, for this will remain for you longer than a thousand treasures." He does not compare a good name with life, but with treasures. And in another passage he says, "A good name is better than great riches." (Proverbs 22:1) "There is no wealth better than health of body" (Sirach 30:16). I hold, therefore, that it is not permissible to sacrifice one's life for fame or glory. Hence it is not only the suicide who sins gravely, but also those who, without good cause, put themselves in serious danger for human glory. Aristotle says that death is the greatest of evils (*Ethics* 3).

In all these . . . objections, we must note that the question of whether someone can willfully and actively kill himself is not treated, but only the question of the reason that lies behind the act. Therefore, they can prove nothing against the conclusions I have proposed. I concede only that they do not kill themselves with the intention to kill themselves. None of the deaths in these arguments, whether lawful or not, is suicide in the sense that I accept, that is, the suicide orders himself to die and the order entails the statement, "I wish to die."

Hence the most crucial issue lies in the fifteenth objection. Could Brutus, Cato, Decius, and numerous others who killed themselves have been innocently ignorant of the fact that such a killing is unlawful, since they all believed it to be the best and most noble death, and were praised for it by men reputed to be wise? I respond by pointing out that there is the same issue with other divine commandments. There are many divine precepts which were by the pagans, and still are today, not unknown but ignored, such as those concerning fornication or the revenge of injuries, in which we do not suffer under an invincible ignorance, but we admit with St. Paul, "God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts," and they committed all evil deeds, malice, fornication, homicide, etc. (Romans 1:24ff.). And to excuse such things is the wisdom of this world, but folly before God. The natural light of reason can teach that it is unlawful to commit suicide, because the philosophers most zealous of virtue taught this, as is evident from Aristotle (*Ethics* 3), who said that to kill oneself is not a courageous deed, but a cowardly one, in that the suicide cannot bear the rigors of life, and from Cicero: "Why take my own life when I have no cause to do so? Why choose mistreatment? Although this may sometimes be wise, it is true wisdom neither to desire death nor to fear it."

For the final objection concerning Samson, Razis, Saul, and some others, we cannot say the same of all. It is necessary to excuse Samson, whom Paul lists among the just. Whence Augustine says Samson is excused for the reason that he was moved by the spirit of God, which is not speculative, but is made clear in Judges 17:28, where we are told that he asked God to restore his original strength so he could be revenged on his enemies. There is another solution: He did not kill himself intentionally, but he wished to kill and overthrow his foes, his own death being the necessary consequence of that. He might well have wished to save himself

while killing the others, if this had been possible, and we may take this for lawful without needing further revelation. For who would doubt that some man in battle or defending his city can, though certain of death, perform a deed beneficial to his city and detrimental to the enemy. We read of Eleazar, who ran under the belly of the elephant he thought was carrying King Antiochus, stabbed it with his sword, and perished under its weight when it fell (1 Maccabes 6:43ff.). He suffered a noble death, for, as the scripture says, he freely sacrificed himself for his people. The deed is not rebuked; as Ambrose says in the chapter on courage in *On duties*, it honored Eleazar with wondrous praise. Thus Samson can be excused without recourse to heavenly inspiration. Eleazar killed himself in the same manner as Samson. But the same judgment may not be given on Saul. He was denied the grace of God, and it is not necessary to seek excuses for him. Sabellicus writes that Saul did not kill himself, but only considered taking his life. He knew suicide was sinful, and was suddenly killed by the Amalekite. This is a bad lapse on the part of Christian historians, because we read in 1 Samuel 31 that Saul fell on his own sword and died. Razis, on the other hand, may probably be excused, although St. Thomas (II-II, q.64, art. 5) does not excuse him. . . .

JOHN CALVIN (1509–1564)

Sermons on Job:

13th Sermon on the 3rd Chapter of Job
17th Sermon on the 5th Chapter of Job (in Archive only)
22nd Sermon on the 5th Chapter of Job (in Archive only)
24th Sermon on the 6th Chapter of Job (in Archive only)

The French theologian and reformer John Calvin (originally Jean Calvin or Cauvin), was born in Noyon, Picardy, to a staunch Roman Catholic family; his father hoped that he would become a priest. He went to Paris to study Latin and theology (and to flee the plague at Noyon) at the age of 14, but after his father was dismissed from the Roman Church by his employers at Noyon Cathedral, the young Calvin, at his father's urging, shifted his course of study from theology to law. Even as a young man, Calvin was said to be extremely religious. He converted to the Protestant doctrines of the Reformation and was banished from Paris in 1533 with his friend, the rector Nicolas Cop, when the humanist reformers were renounced as heretical by the conservative faculty of the Collège Royal. Having been driven out of Geneva once, in 1538, Calvin succeeded in a second try at establishing the Consistory, an ecclesiastical court, and in 1541, he established government reform in Geneva, which would serve as the focal point for the defense of Protestantism throughout Europe. However, though Calvin had asked for a more humane form of execution, the court also oversaw under Calvin's direction the burning at the stake in 1553 of a competing reformist

theologian, Servetus, on a pile of Servetus's own books. Strongly committed to the importance of education, Calvin founded the Academy of Geneva (1559), the progenitor of the University of Geneva. In his later years, Calvin suffered from very poor health, including lung hemorrhages, gout, migraines, and kidney stones; he was sometimes carried to the pulpit to preach, and on occasion gave lectures from his bed.

Taking refuge in Basel, Switzerland, Calvin published the first edition of his Instituto Christianae Religionis *(in Latin, 1536; in French, 1541; translated into English as* Institutes of the Christian Religion*), his most famous and extraordinarily influential work. Stressing the total sovereignty of God, especially in determining who is elect and who is granted salvation, the* Institutes *brought together the scattered and unsystematic opinions of reformist writers of the period into one body of doctrine. Calvin revised and expanded the work throughout his life, with the fifth and final Latin edition of 1559 reaching a total of four books of 80 chapters, five times the length of the first publication. The five central points of Calvinism, including the total depravity or centrality of sin, and what is often called predestination, were later upheld by the Synod of Dort in 1619 in a denunciation of the competing reform ideology of Armenianism.*

The excerpts from two of Calvin's several sermons on Job reprinted here scrutinize Job's seeming despair and desire to die as he suffers the afflictions God has allowed Satan to impose on him. Calvin argues that afflictions sent by God, however painful, are "for our profit and welfare," and distinguishes between two radically different sorts of desire to die. One is born of suffering and the fear of future sinning: This sort of desire to die is illegitimate, in Calvin's eyes, and itself sinful. In contrast, the form of desire to die (exhibited, for example, by St. Paul [q.v., under New Testament]), the desire to employ oneself in God's service, is legitimate and praiseworthy. Calvin's text is particularly relevant in exploring negative occasions of suicide, that is, choices made by a person apparently considering suicide but who rejects it.

Source

John Calvin, *Sermons of Maister John Calvin, upon the Booke of Job*: 13th Sermon on the 3rd Chapter of Job (57a7-60a62); 17th Sermon on the 5th Chapter of Job (75b57 to 76a37); 22nd Sermon on the 5th Chapter of Job (102b11 to 102b60); 24th Sermon on the 6th Chapter of Job (108a6 to 108b14), translated from the French by Arthur Golding, pp. 57–60, 75–76, 102, 108. London: Impensis Georgij Bishop, 1574; facsimile reprint 1993, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh. Wording, spelling and punctuation somewhat modernized.

SERMONS ON JOB

13th Sermon on the 3rd Chapter of Job

Job complaineth here,; as though God did men wrong to put them into the world, and to exercise them with store of miseries. And so he maketh his reckoning, that if God will have us to live, he should maintain us at our ease, and not encumber us with many troubles. Thus we see briefly what is contained here. Verily Job's intent was not to plead against God, as if he

would go to law with him; but yet in the meanwhile, the grief that he sustained carried him so far forth, that these complaints passed out of his mouth. How now? Wherefore hath God set us in this world? Is it not to the end, that we should know him to be our Father, and that we should bless him, because we be sure that he hath a care of us? But contrariwise it is to be seen, that many men are afflicted and tormented with many miseries. To what purpose does God hold them at that point? It seemeth that he would have his name to be blasphemed. What can they do whom he handleth so rigorously? When they see death before their eyes, or rather have it between their teeth, they can not but fret and chafe at it. Thus we see an occasion of murmuring against God, and it seemeth that he himself is the cause of it. Here we have a very good and profitable lesson: which is that we should assure ourselves, that when God scourgeth us, yet he ceasseth not to give us some taste of his goodness, in such wise as even in the middest of our afflictions we may still praise him, and rejoice in him. Yet notwithstanding it is true that he restraineth our joys, and turneth them into bitterness. But there is a mean betwixt blessing of God's name, and blaspheming of it: which mean is to call upon him when we be oppressed with adversity, and to resort unto him, desiring him to receive us unto mercy. But men can never keep this mean, except God have an eye to it of himself when he scourgeth us. Therefore let us mark first, that whensoever God sendeth us any troubles and sorrows, he ceaseth not to make us taste of his goodness therewithal, to assuage the anguish that might hold our hearts in distress. How is that? We have shewed heretofore, that if men had an eye to God's former benefits towards them (yea though it were but in that he hath sustained them from their childhood, after he had brought them out of their mother's womb, and given them life) it were enough to comfort them, even when they be overloaded with despair, and to make them think: May not God punish us justly? for we be bound to bear patiently the adversity that he sendeth, and nature teacheth us so to do, forsomuch as he bestoweth so many benefits upon us, according as Job hath shewed heretofore. We see then how this only one consideration ought to assuage our sorrows, according as it is to be seen, that if men put sugar or honey into a medicine that is over bitter, it will allay it in such sort, as the patient may the better take it, whereas otherwise it would go near to choke him. But there is yet a further matter in this: namely, that God sheweth us the use of his chastisements which he sendeth us: which is not that he meaneth to destroy us so often as he scourges us: but that it is for our profit and welfare: and he promiseth us, that if we be faithful, he will not suffer [1 Cor. 10:13] us to be racked out of measure, but will support us. So then, if we be afflicted, there is no reason why we should take pritch [complain] against God, as though we found nothing but rigor at his hand. For we be so comforted in our afflictions, as if our unthankfulness letted [hindered] us not, we might rejoice and say, blessed be the name of God, although he send us not all our own desires. . . . There is great reason why God should chastise men. For how great are our sins? the number of them is infinite. Again, if we look upon our lusts, there is also a very bottomless gulf, which hath need to be mended. God therefore must mortify us. Furthermore, if we consider how much we be given to the world: we shall find that our affections had need to be plucked from it by Gods chastisements. Moreover how great is our pride and presumptuousness? And therefore must God needs humble us. Besides all this, how cold are we to crave his help? and therefore he must be faine to enforce us to it. Finally, ought not our faith to be tried and made known? Then see we not reasons inowe [enough] why God holdeth us here, and will have us to be miserable, so as there is nothing but pain, trouble, torment, and anguish in all our whole life? Is there not sufficient reason why God should do this? Mark here a special

point. And sith that he continually calleth us unto him, and maketh us free passage unto him, and that we have such a remedy in our miseries: may we not hold ourselves well appayed? We see how we ought to be armed and fenced against the said temptations, which reigned overmuch in Job, howebeit that he was not utterly overcome of it. For when Job speaketh here of *such as desire the grave, and which willingly dig for it as for some hidden treasure, longing to die and can not:* he putteth himself in the same rank, as we shall see by the sequel: wherein he confirmeth his own infirmity and vice. For it is not lawful for the faithful to mislike their own life, and to wish so for death. True it is that we may wish for death in one respect: which is, in consideration that we be held here in such bondage of sin, as we can not serve God so freely as were to be wished, because we are overfraught with vices. In respect hereof it is certain that we may sigh, and desire God to take us quickly out of the world. But (as is said afore) it may not be for that we hate our life, or for that we be weary to be held here because we be handled over rigorously: but we must bear our lot patiently, in waiting Gods leisure to deliver us. And we see that Paul holdeth the [Rom. 7:24.25] self same measure when he saith to the Romans, Alas, who shall deliver me from this mortal body? For I am unhappy. But yet therewithall he sayth, Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Lo, hear how Saint Paul on the one side calleth himself unhappy, and desireth to be taken out of the world: and on the other side is contented and at rest, because God prefereth him, and he knoweth that God will never forsake him, howbeit that he be subject to many miseries. We see here his contentation. And that we may the better understand the whole: let us mark how Job hath done amiss in two points. That is to wit, in not having the regard that he ought to have had in desiring death: and also in not keeping measure. Here we see two faults that are very gross. When I say that Job had not his eyes fastened upon the mark that he ought, I mean that his wishing for death, was not because he saw himself to be a miserable sinner, and could not attain to the perfection which all of us ought to labor for, but because he was weary of the nipping griefs, as well which he presently endured in his person, as which he had sustained before in his goods. And so he desired death, because it seemed to him that God pressed him overfore. Thus we see the first fault that I spake of. . . . But it is not enough to think as afore is said [2 Cor. 7:11]: that is to wit, to wish death is such wise as I have earst shewed: but it behoveth also to keep measure. I say, we must not only wish it upon good cause, but we must also bridle our desires, for as it be ruled by the good pleasure of God. And this will bring to pass, that the outrage which is shewed here in Job, shall be restrained as with a bridle. I have already touched this point in the text which I alleged out of S. Paul. For after he had made his moan, and wished to be delivered out of this prison of death: he addeth, I thank my God: and he ceasseth not to be quiet, even in the midst of those complaints and longings. And why so? for he seeth it is good reason that God should be the master, and govern us at his pleasure: and that we should patiently wait for such end as he listeth to give us. S. Paul perceiving this, concludeth immediately, that although he be a wretched sinner, yet notwithstanding he is sure that God will guide him in such wise, as his salvation can not miscarry. S. Paul then had an eye to those two things. And therefore he sayth that he yeldeth God thanks, not withstanding that he be in misery. Even so must we do. . . .

And hereby we see how it is not only granted to Gods children to wish for death, but also that they ought to wish for it. For they shew not a good proof of their faith, except they seek to go out of this world, according as in deed all things haste and labor toward their mark. But our mark is aloft, and therefore must we never leave running till we come

to our way's end which GOD hath set us: and we must desire that that may be quickly. Nevertheless let us always bear in mind the cause that I have spoken: namely, that we must not be provoked to wish for death, because we be subject some to sickness, some to poverty, some to one thing, and some to another: but because we be not fully reformed to the image of God, and because we have many imperfections in us. Mark well (I say) the cause that must spur and provoke us to desire death: namely, to the end that being rid of this mortal body (which is like a cabane [hut] full of stench and noisomeness) we may be fully reformed to the image of God, so as he may reign in us, and all the corruption of our nature be utterly done away.

SOLOMON BEN JEHIEL LURIA (1510–1573)

Yam shel Shelomoh On Bava Kamma 8:59

Solomon ben Jehiel Luria was a rabbi and author of several analytical discourses on the Talmud [q.v.] and its early commentaries. He was born in Brest-Litovsk, Lithuania, and was educated as a child by his grandfather, Rabbi Isaac Klauberia, in Poznan. After returning home and continuing his studies in 1535, Luria married and was made rabbi of Brest. In 1555, he became leader of Lublin's celebrated yeshivah*, or Talmudic academy. Luria, careful and methodical in his studies of Jewish law, said of himself, "I was painstaking always to trace the last source of the Halakah," and his assiduous reliance on Jewish law and its sources was combined with a distrust of all forms of secular philosophy. Luria once told a friend and fellow scholar, Rabbi Moses Isserles, a student of classical philosophy, "You are turning to the wisdom of the uncircumcised Aristotle. Woe unto my eyes that they should see such a thing." Luria's many works include* Hokmat Shelomoh *(1582), a collection of analytical glosses on the Talmud, and* Yam shel Shelomoh *(1615), a study of several individual treatises of the Talmud. He died in Lublin on November 7, 1573, several years before his major commentaries were published.*

Luria approaches the question of suicide in his commentary On Bava Kamma*, dealing particularly with the authoritative tradition concerning the suicide of Saul in the Hebrew Bible [q.v.] and the story of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon's martyrdom in* Avodah Zarah *[q.v., under Babylonian Talmud and under* Tosafot*]. Luria contributes interpretations of the prohibition of suicide, a prohibition that had long since become general within Judaism. Arguing that allowing or even encouraging others to kill themselves can in some circumtances be permissible; that even setting the house on fire is somehow akin to letting things happen rather than to direct self-killing; and that Saul's suicide was permissible not because he sought to spare himself suffering, but rather to save the lives of many others. At the same time he draws a distinction between actively committing suicide and allowing oneself to be killed, concluding that the latter is allowable while the act of self-killing is prohibited, even in cases of torture and coercion to commit sin.*

Source

Solomon ben Jehiel Luria, *Yam shel Shelomoh On Bava Kamma* 8:59. Tr. Baruch Brody.

from ON BAVA KAMMA

It seems to me that even if one is captured by the idolators and he is afraid that they will torture him until he worships idols, he should not kill himself. He should do his best to endure the tortures. . . . One should let oneself be killed and not commit these sins, and this is not considered suicide, as Asheri says that it is not considered suicide when one allows himself to be killed [rather than commit idolatry]. But to kill himself is certainly prohibited. And that is what we find in the case of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon. . . . But he did ask others to hasten his death.

But if one is afraid that they will torture him because of other Jews, and many lives will be lost, as some rulers have forced one Jew to falsely testify against all the others so that afterwards many died, then he is permitted to kill himself. And perhaps Saul thought of this when he fell on his sword. He thought that if he was captured alive, they would mock him and torture him. The children of Israel would not be able to see and hear the suffering of the king, and they would not think of their lives, but would avenge him and save him and many thousands would die. . . . To save the lives of others it is permissible to kill oneself. . . .

Nevertheless, one can set the house afire so that he and his children will be burned to death in a time of decrees [i.e, persecutions], and this is not considered suicide, but like letting oneself be killed, and this is permissible. Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon also asked [the executioner] to hasten his death, but he would not do it himself by opening his mouth to allow in the fire, as this is literally committing suicide.

CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS CULTURES (documented 1519–1621)

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#10. *History of the New World*
Suffering at the Hands of the Spaniards
(Girolamo Benzoni, 1565)

SOUTH AMERICA

Inca

#11. *The Incas*
The Burial of Wives
(Pedro de Cieza de León, 1553)

#12. *Natural & Moral History of the Indies*
Of Superstitions They Used to the Dead
(José de Acosta, 1589)

#13. *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*
What Those Who Hang Themselves Really Are
(Pablo José de Arriaga, 1621)

The Mesoamerican cultures, including the Aztec and Maya, the peoples of the Caribbean Islands, and the Inca of South America, were among the many cultural groups inhabiting the western hemisphere at the time contact was established between the Americas and Europe; there are still some 170 indigenous

tribes speaking distinctive languages in Mexico alone, and 31 different Mayan languages and groups. Some groups among those who had migrated across Beringia into North America had continued to move south into Central and South America, eventually establishing large and sophisticated cities and empires. Among the major sites were Tenochtitlan (the Aztec, or Mexica, capital in the location now known as Mexico City), Palenque (one of many major Mayan city and temple complexes), and Machu Picchu, now believed to have been the summer capital of the Inca empire. About a fifth of the global population lived in the Americas at the time of contact with Europeans, and although estimates vary widely, the Aztec, Mayan, and Inca populations all clearly numbered in the millions at the height of these civilizations.

Europeans arrived in the Americas in 1492. Despite popular assumptions that the native inhabitants of the New World were conquered by the sword and the cross, especially by Spanish conquistadores interested in gold and in military domination and Jesuits engaged in religious conversion, most of the indigenous populations were killed by European disease—smallpox, measles, typhus, plague, influenza, malaria, and yellow fever—diseases to which New World populations had never been exposed and had no immunity. Entire peoples in the Americas were virtually wiped out, like the Caribbean group known as the Taino living on Hispaniola, where Columbus had landed in December of 1492. Most other indigenous populations were reduced to remnants of their original numbers, in many places an 80–90% decline. The so-called Black Legend blames Spanish cruelty and injustice for the decimation of the Indians and, in doing so, identifies a major factor in the catastrophic population decline in the New World and the destruction of once-powerful pre-contact civilizations. Other factors, including famine, collapse of the ruling class, intergroup warfare, and other forms of social upheaval, are still under debate as contributors to these societies' eventual collapse even before the arrival of the Spanish, but it was disease that took the greatest toll.

Whether practices of human sacrifice contributed to the collapse or were practices of these societies that marked their zeniths, the archeological remains of the Mesoamerican cultures provide extensive records of practices related to suicide, including bloodletting and autosacrifice, self-immolation, live burial of wives and retainers, decapitation, and—especially among the Aztecs—heart sacrifice. The art and architecture of the Formative, Classic, and Post-classic periods of these cultures, including those like the Maya with highly developed iconographic systems, show that death-producing practices were a central part of pre-contact life.

What accounts for these practices is still a subject of dispute. Michael Harner's thesis, promulgated in the late 1970s, that human sacrifice and the associated institutionalized cannibalism among the Aztecs were a product of protein scarcity—caused by seasonal crop failures, the depletion of wild game, and the lack of domestic animal food sources in a region that, though itself fertile, was surrounded by poor farmland—has not been supported by the evidence. Human sacrifice in this and other cultures, according to a more recent examination of the evidence by Michael Windelman, is associated with high population density, population pressure, and war for land and resources; human sacrifice may also play a role in ideological integration. Nevertheless, whatever the background ecological and social explanation of human sacrifice, the degree to which these practices should be understood as suicide or suicide-like actions depends in part on the motivation with which they were undertaken and the way they were understood by those involved in and subject to these practices—that is, the degree to which they were perceived as self-initiated, and whether they were involuntary, socially required but not desired, or elective.

It is also a function of the extent to which the religious violence of human sacrifice was, as David Carrasco modifies René Girard's claim, the "public heart and soul of the sacred." Determining this is a considerable challenge in these cultures, since easily interpretable primary narratives do not survive.

Although extensive archeological and anthropological research has expanded contemporary knowledge of indigenous cultures, most of the textual sources about pre-Columbian life come from the accounts of the European conquerors, missionaries, and explorers who first came into contact with these societies. These early accounts, a number of which are presented here, are clearly influenced by the assumptions and biases the Europeans brought to their observations, yet they do provide some idea of indigenous cultural beliefs and practices concerning suicide before these societies succumbed to conquest and disease. It is the records of Spanish conquistadores and priests like Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (selection #8), Hernán Cortés (selection #2), Bartolomé de Las Casas (selection #5), and Bernardino de Sahagún (selection #3), often reporting oral testimony from native informants, that constitute the vast majority of extant eyewitness accounts. Of course, it can hardly be supposed that these texts give a fully accurate account of native beliefs and practices about suicide unaffected by cultural influences from Europe; they have clearly been filtered through European eyes, especially as influenced by the Spanish Inquisition. Some—like the distortion of the indigenous understanding of the various parts of the body as having different energies into the concept of a unified soul—were comparatively modest, and some—like Diego de Landa's account of the "goddess of the gallows," Ixtab, who especially favored suicides by hanging (selection #10)—were, it is claimed, an outright fabrication. Yet because these accounts were filtered through a set of European religious and cultural assumptions that were quite different from those of contemporary assumptions—at that time, Western thought saw suicide primarily as crime and sin, rather than, as in modern times, the consequence of mental illness and psychopathology—it may be easier to arrive at an informative view about these cultures than modern ethnopsychology permits. Furthermore, stark reductions in the populations of the New World meant severe cultural disruption brought about by both the destruction of records and the interruption of oral traditions. The early accounts presented here, although often strongly biased and grossly exaggerated, provide in some ways the closest available access to pre-contact views, since after contact and exposure to a newly dominant group, a population will adopt new forms of explanation. Thus, these early sources provide our closest look at these cultures' views of suicide and related practices in sacrifice. Much of what we might now describe as suicide in these cultures was not apparently viewed as problematic then, and certainly not conceptualized in the same ways.

Most of these early accounts, colored by assumptions about the superiority of the Europeans and the inferiority or savagery of the native inhabitants of the Americas, as well as about the truth of the Catholic faith and the idolatrous nature of native religion, emphasize the bizarre character of the religious and cultural practices of the peoples described, especially when those involve bloodletting, suicide, human sacrifice, and cannibalism. In contrast, a few early observers, notably Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Dominican friar and then bishop known as the "Protector of the Indians," emphasized the cruelty of the Spanish and other European invaders. In his sympathetic Defense of the Indians *(selection #5), directed against "the persecutors and slanderers of the peoples of the new world discovered across the seas," Las Casas viewed indigenous practices like bloodletting and human sacrifice as evidence, in theological terms, of probable error resulting from genuine but misguided religiosity on the part of indigenous peoples.*

The Selections

Aztec

The Aztecs, or Mexica, invaded the valley of Mexico around the 13th century A.D. after the 12th- century decline of the resident Toltecs, eventually settling on an island in the western part of Lake Texcoco and establishing the twin (and often rival) cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco around 1325. The name Aztec refers to their traditional place of origin at Aztlán. The Aztecs, one of the last waves of Nahua migration from the north, like many other groups in the region, spoke a dialect of Nahuatl; Nahuatl languages are still spoken in central Mexico by about 1.5 million people. Aztec society was both militaristic and agricultural, emphasizing cycles of birth and death; their cities were built around immense ceremonial complexes of temples.

Human sacrifice, for which the Aztecs are known, predated the rise of the Aztecs and had religious importance throughout Mesoamerica. The murals of Teotihuacán, the great metropolis of the pre-Aztec Classic period, show that sacrifice of the heart was a particularly important ritual. Heart sacrifice is depicted explicitly in one Teotihuacán mural in which two coyotes are shown extracting the still-beating heart of a deer; these animal figures represent human capacities. Aztec sacrifices corresponded to important dates in the cycle of the sun calendar or to astronomical events like eclipses. Architectural structures at the Templo Mayor (now excavated and visible in Mexico City) display banks of skulls of sacrificial captives, and in one offering cache can be seen the skeletal remains of 42 children sacrificed to the rain gods. Noble women and slaves were also sacrificed, and the "flower wars" with neighboring groups were conducted for the purpose of obtaining captive warriors for sacrifice.

The Spaniard Hernán Cortés landed on the coast of Mexico on April 22, 1519. Two years later, Cortés, having won over the Tlaxcala--who were engaged in a flower war with the—as allies, stormed Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco. Although the Aztecs did keep pictorial codices, the extant records were burned twice, once by the ruling elite of Tenochtitlán and once by the Spanish missionaries eager to eliminate references to a pre-Christian past. Each time these records were destroyed, new histories arose to take their place.

Selection #1 is taken from one of these new histories, the *Codex Chimalpopoca*. It recounts Aztec mythology about the earlier Toltecs, the historic inhabitants of Tula whom the Aztecs revered as the ancestors of their rulers. Tolpiltzin Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl, whose lifetime is dated in the *Codex* with a year count employing four names, Flint, House, Rabbit, Reed, and 13 numbers, at 817–895 A.D., is said to have been conceived when his mother Chimalman swallowed a piece of jade. The narrative describes Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's life, how he abolished human sacrifice, and was driven into exile by his rivals, including the god-sorcerer Tezcatlipoca. Quetzalcoatl is deceived by the sorcerer into drunkenness and then incest with his sister; in remorse and political weakness, still pursued by the sorcerer, Quetzalcoatl immolates himself in a sacred bonfire, his soul rising to the heavens to become Venus, the morning star.

In addition to Quetzalcoatl, Aztec religion recognized two other major deities, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc; human sacrifice was often performed to these and lesser gods. Among the Aztecs, human blood was believed necessary to sustain and renew the world and often involved heart sacrifice. Hernán Cortes, in his first and second letters, dated July 10, 1519, and October 13, 1520, respectively (selection #2), in which he described the culture of the indigenous people whom his forces had conquered, portrays the Aztec practices of human sacrifice

vividly, arguing that the repugnance of these practices justifies the imposition of Christianity, if necessary by force. Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), a Franciscan friar who had arrived in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán in 1529, describes ceremonies of human sacrifice prepared for in a particularly elaborate way. Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called *The Florentine Codex* (selection #3), is regarded as a reliable source of information about Aztec culture in part because he learned the Aztec language, Nahuatl, and could interview native speakers who knew no Spanish and nothing of Spanish culture. Sahagún's informants also replied to his questions in hieroglyphic paintings, some of which are still extant. In addition, Sahagún painstakingly cross-checked his accounts among multiple sources. In the second part of selection #3, from Book 7 of *The Florentine Codex*, Sahagún relates the Aztec myth of the creation of the sun and moon. Two deities, Tecuciztecatl, the privileged god, and Nanauatzin, who is poor, attempt to sacrifice themselves on a pyre so that they can become the sun of our world. Tecuciztecatl, who goes first, shrinks back from the fire four times and thus becomes only the moon; Nanauatzin lets himself burn without hesitation and instead becomes the sun. When the new sun and moon have not moved in the sky, the other gods, except one who must be forced, decide to sacrifice themselves too in order to give the sun power. However, the gods' sacrifices are not enough, and Ecatl, the wind god, having sacrificed the other gods, must still drive the sun and moon across the sky. In the other part of selection #2, also from *The Florentine Codex*, Sahagún describes how youths were chosen to be sacrificed to the god Tezcatlipoca in annual festivities occurring in the spring month Tóxcatl: a young man with an unblemished body was prepared for sacrifice for a year before the festival and worshipped as the image of the god before his ultimate death, climaxing in removal of the heart and subsequent decapitation at the summit of the temple steps.

Human sacrifice did not always involve individual attention: in some ceremonies, war prisoners were ritually sacrificed, singly or by the thousands; it is claimed that somewhere between 10,000 and 80,400 persons were sacrificed at the inauguration of the great temple, the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City, in the year 1487 A.D., only a few decades before the arrival of the Spanish.

To varying degrees, victims of the various forms of sacrifice were unwilling, willing, or eager to play this role. Central to Aztec belief was the notion of *indebtedness*, the belief that because the gods had sacrificed themselves in creating the earth and the human beings who inhabited it, human beings were obligated to repay the debt by sacrificing themselves in return. Offerings of incense, food, flowers, animals, tobacco, and so on were made to the gods, but it was human blood that nourished them—especially the sun—and would enable the sun, rain, processes of growth, and other natural forces to continue to support human beings. Self-sacrifice, thus, was a sort of exchange, the repayment of the created being's great debt, and was rewarded by going to live with the Sun, the Moon, or other deities in their diurnal courses or other natural processes. Thus, to sacrifice oneself or be sacrificed was a privilege, not a penalty. Many of those sacrificed are said to have gone to their deaths without fear, knowing they would live again with these gods—but others had to be dragged to the places of sacrifice.

Suicide could also be seen as preferable to being killed. In his *Monarchia Indiana* (selection #4), Juan de Torquemada (c. 1557–1624), a friar and respected recorder of Aztec history, reports that the third king of Tenochtitlan, Chimalpopoca, having been defeated by his relative, the Emperor Maxtla, first attempted to sacrifice himself and finally hanged himself to escape the indignity of death by starvation in a cage, thus achieving victory in death.

Of particular interest is Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Defense of the Indians* (selection #5), in that he attempts to employ Catholic theology with its emphasis on the centrality of sacrifice to God to examine human sacrifice as evidence of the religious devotion, rather than depravity, of the indigenous peoples. "The greatest way to worship God is to offer him sacrifice," he writes, "every man owes God more than his life." Las Casas says he understands indigenous practices in this way, even if they are misguided in the gods to whom they are addressed. They are not grounds for waging war against these peoples.

Maya

The religious overtones present in most Mesoamerican accounts of suicide are even more explicit in the European depictions of Maya civilization. The Preclassic or Formative Period of Maya civilization began in the third millennium B.C. and lasted to approximately 300 A.D., eventually giving way to the Maya Classic Period, c. 320–909 A.D., a time characterized by the formation of distinctive scientific and cultural achievements, including an extraordinarily sophisticated calendar and system of astronomical prediction. At its height, the domain of the Mayan groups extended throughout southern Mexico, the Yucatan, Belize, Guatemala, and western portions of El Salvador and Honduras. As among the Aztec, death-producing practices were numerous. Mayan stelae at ritual centers like Toniná, for instance, show the sacrifice of defeated kings and war captives; glyphs at Yaxchilán depict decapitation and autosacrifice; and murals at Bonampak show the capture and torture of captives for sacrifice. Reliefs of the ball court at Chichen Itza show players being sacrificed; it is thought that these were the defeated players, although some sources claim they were the winning players. Vase paintings at Palenque also illustrate human sacrifice. Ritual objects for sacrifice recovered in excavations include highly decorated knives and special bowls for holding just-extracted human hearts. As Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller have argued, while in recent history, the Maya were assumed to be nonviolent in comparison to the Aztecs, in fact, war and human sacrifice were central to Mayan religion and culture throughout the Classic period.

Mayan religion identified its gods with the natural world, especially forces that affected agriculture. According to the *Popol Vuh* creation myth (selection #6), dictated in K'iche' Mayan to Dominican friars in Guatemala between 1554 and 1558, and later rediscovered and translated into Spanish by Francisco Ximénez, the gods fashioned human beings from maize dough so that humans could worship and sustain them. The Mayan universe was divided into several parts: the heavens, containing 14 layers, of which the earth was the lowest, and the underworld, which consisted of nine layers. The Maya were also said to believe in the immortality of the human soul, though this may not have been a unified concept but rather one shaped by European interpreters. As among the Aztecs, the sacrifice of human blood was seen by the Maya as necessary for the sustenance of cosmic order; indeed, as Schele and Miller put it, "the very existence of the universe depended upon the willingness of human beings to sustain the gods with their blood offerings." Human blood, the nourishment of the gods, was essential to keep the sun in its course and to prevent it from sinking below the world forever. Bloodletting rituals also formed an important part of Mayan culture, involving piercing of the tongue, earlobes, and genitals, as a public institution and means of gaining public merit and respect. The bloodletting ritual "was basic to the institution of rulership."

The sun and moon are sacrifices themselves in Mayan mythology. The second part of the *Popol Vuh* (selection #6) tells the story of how, before the successful creation of humans, the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque became the sun and moon of our world. Having willingly sacrificed themselves in Xibalba, the Mayan underworld, the twins come back to life with the ability to kill and resurrect themselves and others. Returning to Xibalba, the twins demonstrate their powers and convince the Xibalban lords to kill themselves, but they do not bring them back to life. With Xibalba defeated, the twins rise into the sky where they appear as the sun and moon. In another passage from the third part of the *Popol Vuh*, the god of fire demands that human sacrifice, including heart sacrifice, must be paid to him in exchange for the gift of fire to the community.

Diego de Landa (1524–79), a zealous Catholic Spaniard who spent most of his life in the Yucatan, claimed that Mayan belief held that wrongdoers would suffer intensely in the lowest hell, called Mitnal, while those who committed suicide by hanging, along with other good people—warriors killed in battle and women dying in childbirth—would enjoy a heavenly bliss. Suicides would be watched over by the goddess Ixtab, who, among her other roles, served as the goddess of suicide and the gallows. De Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, from which this text is taken (selection #7), provides the fullest account of the ancient Maya to have survived the early colonial period and may provide particularly direct evidence of pre-contact Yucatec beliefs, though whether it is reliable is not clear: De Landa was known for his use of torture in interrogating native subjects ("nothing can be extracted from an Indian without torture," he said), and some scholars suggest that the *Relación* was written to form part of his defense in an investigation of his inquisitorial activities—hence its purpose of describing idolatrous practices among the Indians. Indeed, some contemporary scholars argue that his account of Ixtab is a fabrication designed to serve his own zealous agenda.

A figure said to be the goddess Ixtab is shown in the eclipse tables of the *Dresden Codex* hanging from the sky with a noose around her neck; her eyes are closed, and black circles, a sign of decomposition, appear on her cheeks. If Mayan belief recognized a goddess of suicide favorable to those who killed themselves by hanging, it might in part explain the frequency of suicidal behavior observed by the Spanish invaders. Diego López de Cogolludo (1613–65), for example, said of a man who had committed suicide that ". . . the arrogance of this Indian was such, that being so badly wounded, to avoid its being said he died at the hands of that Spaniard, he went away and in the presence of his own people he hanged himself with a liana. . . ."

Caribbean Peoples

According to early chronicles presented in the next three selections, suicide was also practiced in individual and group forms in the islands of the Caribbean, especially those now known as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti/Dominican Republic. Gonzalo Fernándo de Oviedo (1478–1557), whom some commentators have called a "man of balanced judgment," includes examples of suicide in his *Natural Historia de las Indias* (1526), the first official history of the western hemisphere (selection #8). Oviedo writes that "in some of the islands" where poisonous yucca grows ("San Juan [Puerto Rico], Cuba, Jamaica and Hispaniola"), it was said that group suicide often occurred at the death of a chief or principal lord by means of yucca juice. According to Oviedo, those who had served the chief believed that dying with him would provide a passage to serving the master in a heavenly afterlife;

if, however, the servants chose to die naturally or by some other cause, their spirits would not be granted any sort of afterlife at all.

The native inhabitants of Hispaniola were said not only to commit suicide to gain rewards in the afterlife, but also to kill themselves in order to avoid suffering in this life. López de Gómara (1511–66), a chaplain to Hernán Cortés and early historian (who never himself visited the New World), reports in *La Historia General de las Indias* (1552), that the native American population resorted to suicide to escape Spanish domination (selection #9). In selection #10, Girolamo Benzoni (1519–70), an Italian who combined the reports of Martire de D'Anghiera, Oviedo, and others with his own observations in the Caribbean, Central America, and Peru, insists that the native inhabitants aborted their children and killed themselves in various ways—including hanging themselves by their own hair—to avoid Spanish religion and government. Benzoni's account has been widely repeated by those emphasizing the cruelty of the Spanish.

Inca

The Incas were originally a tribe of primarily Quechua-speaking native Americans who lived in the central Andean highlands, an area near and around modern-day Peru. In the 15th century A.D., the Incas moved into social and cultural prominence by assimilating or conquering the inhabitants of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, western Argentina, southern Columbia, and northern Chile, thus assuming control over an estimated 10 million indigenous people. Just a few decades later, they themselves succumbed to a tiny Spanish force led by the ruthless Spaniard Francisco Pizarro and to the ravages of European-introduced disease. At the height of the Inca empire, officials used a decimal system of reckoning to make census counts, keeping their records on *quipus*, knotted strings (a system still used by indigenous peoples in the highlands in keeping counts of their sheep and llamas), and exercised rigid control over both male and female commoners in agricultural, laboring, and military service. Although most women were allowed to marry and lead ordinary domestic lives, some—those of particular beauty and health—were chosen as young girls to undergo special training and were either assigned to the temple of the sun, given to nobles as secondary wives, or sacrificed on ritual occasions.

Several early accounts of Inca practices involve ritual funeral suicide. In the first of these selections (selection #11), Pedro de Cieza de León (1520–54) describes the manner in which, when a man was entombed, his favorite wives, his servants, his property, and a "great quantity" of food and drink were also buried with him. While it is not clear whether the deaths of the wives and servants are to be described as voluntary—they were clearly heavily socially controlled—Cieza de León also reports that some women, fearing they would not find a place in the tomb with the wives who were buried alive, hanged themselves by their own hair. In selection #12, Joseph de Acosta describes the funeral of the great Inca emperor Huyana Capac, the father of Atahualpa, at the time the Spaniards conquered the Incas: at this funeral, more than a thousand people were put to death in order to be buried with the dead ruler. ". . . [T]hese that were appointed to death," says de Acosta, "held themselves happy." As with the Aztec and Maya, this description suggests a death-producing practice short of self-initiated suicide, but involving willing subjection to death. In the final selection,

#13, yet another Jesuit, Joseph de Arriaga, describes a case of suicide in a way that reveals the tensions between Inca and Spanish culture: the Incas, he says, hold those who hang themselves as "more than human," for which reason, he speculates, they commit suicide so easily; but the Spanish regard suicide as a shameful act and attempt to discourage it by burning the corpse of a victim as an example.

It can hardly be supposed that accounts of pre-contact native beliefs and practices in Central and South America made by European soldiers and missionaries are not shaped by these invaders' antecedent views about suicide, but these accounts do suggest that Europeans encountered strikingly different attitudes about suicide in the New World.

CENTRAL AMERICA

AZTEC

[#1] from *Codex Chimalpopoca (1570)*
The Death of Quetzalcoatl
(in Archive only)

[#2] from *Letters from Mexico*
(Hernán Cortés, 1519–20)

The First Letter

. . . and rooms for slaves and servants of which they have many. Each of these chieftains [at Tenochtitlan] has in front of the entrance to his house a very large courtyard and some two or three or four of them raised very high with steps up to them and all very well built. Likewise they have their shrines and temples with raised walks which run all around the outside and are very wide; there they keep the idols which they worship, some of stone, some of clay and some of wood, which they honor and serve with such customs and so many ceremonies that many sheets of paper would not suffice to give Your Royal Highnesses a true and detailed account of them all. And the temples where they are kept are the largest and the best and the finest built of all the buildings found in the towns; and they are much adorned with rich hanging cloths and featherwork and other fineries.

Each day before beginning any sort of work they burn incense in these temples and sometimes sacrifice their own persons, some cutting their tongues, others their ears, while there are some who stab their bodies with knives. All the blood which flows from them they offer to those idols, sprinkling it in all parts of the temple, or sometimes throwing it into the air or performing many other ceremonies, so that nothing is begun without sacrifice having first been made. They have a most horrid and abominable custom which truly ought to be punished and which until now we have seen in no other part, and this is that, whenever they wish to ask something of the idols, in order that their plea may find more acceptance, they take many girls and boys and even adults, and in the presence of the idols they open their chests while they are still alive and take out

their hearts and entrails and burn them before the idols, offering the smoke as sacrifice. Some of us have seen this, and they say it is the most terrible and frightful thing they have ever witnessed.

This these Indians do so frequently that, as we have been informed, and, in part, have seen from our own experience during the short while we have been here, not one year passes in which they do not kill and sacrifice some fifty persons in each temple; and this is done and held as customary from the island of Cozumel to this land where we now have settled. Your Majesties may be most certain that, as this land seems to us to be very large, and to have many temples in it, not one year has passed, as far as we have been able to discover, in which three or four thousand souls have nor been sacrificed in this manner. Let Your Royal Highnesses consider, therefore, whether they should not put an end to such evil practices, for certainly Our Lord God would be well pleased if by the hand of Your Royal Highnesses these people were initiated and instructed in our Holy Catholic Faith, and the devotion, trust and hope which they have in these their idols were transferred to the divine power of God; for it is certain that if they were to worship the true God with such fervor, faith and diligence, they would perform many miracles. And we believe that it is not without cause that Our Lord God has been pleased that these parts be discovered in the name of Your Royal Highnesses so that Your Majesties may gain much merit and reward in the sight of God by commanding that these barbarous people be instructed and by Your hands be brought to the True Faith. For, as far as we have been able to learn, we believe that had we interpreters and other people to explain to them the error of their ways and the nature of the True Faith, many of them, and perhaps even all, would soon renounce their false beliefs and come to the true knowledge of God; for they live in a more civilized and reasonable manner than any other people we have seen in these parts up to the present. . . .

The Second Letter

. . . All these towers are burial places of chiefs, and the chapels therein are each dedicated to the idol which he venerated. . . .

. . . The most important of these idols, and the ones in whom they have most faith, I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps; and I had those chapels where they were cleaned, for they were full of the blood of sacrifices; and I had images of Our Lady and of other saints put there, which caused Mutezuma and the other natives some sorrow. . . . Mutezuma and many of the chieftains of the city were with me until the idols were removed, the chapel cleaned and the images set up, and I urged them not to sacrifice living creatures to the idols, as they were accustomed, for, as well as being most abhorrent to God, Your Sacred Majesty's laws forbade it and ordered that he who kills shall be killed. And from then on they ceased to do it, and in all the time I stayed in that city I did not see a living creature killed or sacrificed.

The figures of the idols in which these people believe are very much larger than the body of a big man. They are made of dough from all the seeds and vegetables which they eat, ground and mixed together, and bound with the blood of human hearts which those priests tear out while still beating. And also after they are made they offer them more hearts and anoint their faces with the blood. Everything has an idol dedicated to it, in the same manner as the pagans who in antiquity honored their gods. . . .

Source

[#2] Hernan Cortes, *Letters from Mexico.* Tr. and ed. Anthony Pagden. New York: Grossman Publishing, 1971; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 35–37, 106–107.

[#3] from *General History of the Things of New Spain* (The Florentine Codex) (Bernardino de Sahagún, c. 1565)

The Festival in the Month of Tóxcatl

This festival was the most important of all the festivals. It was like Easter, and it occurred near the feast of Resurrection, a few days later. This young man, raised as has been said [with all luxuries, for a year], had a very good appearance [with no flaw on his body] and was chosen from among many. He had long hair down to his waist. When in this festival they killed the young man who had been prepared for this, then they set another apart, who would die within a year. He would go through all the town adorned with flowers in his hand and with persons who accompanied him. He would greet all of those whom he met graciously. All knew that that one was the image of *Tezcatlipoca* and they prostrated themselves before him and worshipped him wherever they encountered him. Twenty days before this festival, they would give this young man four very attractive young women, who had been raised for this, with whom he would have carnal intercourse for all the twenty days. They would change his dress when they gave him these girls. They would cut his hair like a captain, and they would give him other more beautiful garments. Five days before he died, they would give him festivals and banquets in fresh and delightful places. Many important people would accompany him. When the day arrived on which he would die, they would take him to a *cu*, or a place of prayer, that they called *Tlacochcalco*, and before they arrived there, in a place that they called *Tlapitzoayan*, the women separated themselves from him and left him. When they arrived at the place where they would kill him, he himself went up the steps and on each one of them, tore into pieces one of the flutes he had been playing all year. When he arrived at the top, they threw him on the block. They took out his heart and they took the body down in palms. Below, they cut off his head and attached it to a pole that they called *Tzompantli*. Many other ceremonies took place during this festival. . . .

The Sun, Moon, and Stars, and the Binding of the Years

. . . It is told that when yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken—it is said—the gods gathered themselves together and took counsel among themselves there at Teotihuacan. They spoke; they said among themselves:

> *"Come hither, O gods! Who will carry the burden? Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?"*
> *And upon this, one of them who was there spoke: Tecuciztecatl presented himself. He said: "O gods, I shall be the one."*
> *And again the gods spoke: "[And] who else?"*
> *Thereupon they looked around at one another. They pondered the matter. They said to one another: "How may this be? How may we decide?"*
> *None dared; no one else came forward. Everyone was afraid; they [all] drew back.*
> *And not present was one man, Nanauatzin; he stood there listening among the others to that which was discussed. Then the gods called to this one. They said to him: "Thou shalt be the one, O Nanauatzin."*

He then eagerly accepted the decision; he took it gladly. He said: "It is well. O gods; you have been good to me."

Then they began now to do penance. They fasted four days—both Tecuciztecatl [and Nanauatzin]. And then, also, at this time, the fire was laid. Now it burned, there in the hearth. They named the hearth *teotexcalli*.

And this Tecuciztecatl: that with which he did penance was all costly. His fir branches [were] quetzal feathers, and his grass balls [were] of gold; his maguey spines [were] of green stone; the reddened, bloodied spines [were] of coral. And his incense was very good incense. And [as for] Nanauatzin, his fir branches were made only of green water rushes—green reeds bound in threes, all [making], together, nine bundles. And his grass balls [were] only aromatic weeds. And his maguey spines were these same maguey spines. And the blood with which they were covered [was] his own blood. And [for] his incense, he used only the scabs from his sores, [which] he lifted up. For these two, for each one singly, a hill was made. There they remained, performing penances for four nights. They are now called pyramids—the pyramid of the sun and the pyramid of the moon.

And when they ended their four nights of penitence, then they went to throw down and cast away, each one, their fir branches, and, indeed, all with which they had been performing penances. This was done at the time of the lifting [of the penance]; when, well into the night, they were to do their labor; they were to become gods.

And when midnight had come, thereupon [the gods] gave them their adornment; they arrayed them and readied them. To Tecuciztecatl they gave his round, forked heron feather headdress and his sleeveless jacket. But [as for] Nanauatzin, they bound on his headdress of mere paper and tied on his hair, called his paper hair. And [they gave him] his paper stole and his paper breech clout.

And when this was done, when midnight had come, all the gods proceeded to encircle the hearth, which was called *teotexcalli*, where for four days had burned the fire. On both sides [the gods] arranged themselves in line, and in the middle they set up, standing, these two, named Tecuciztecatl and Nanauatzin. They stood facing and looking toward the hearth.

And thereupon the gods spoke: They said to Tecuciztecatl: "Take courage, O Tecuciztecatl; fall—cast thyself—into the fire!"

Upon this, he went [forward] to cast himself into the flames. And when the heat came to reach him, it was insufferable, intolerable, and unbearable; for the hearth had blazed up exceedingly, a great heap of coals burned, and the flames flared up high. Thus he went terrified, stopped in fear, turned about, and went back. Then once more he set out, in order to try to do it. He exerted himself to the full, that he might cast and give himself to the flames. And he could in no way dare to do it. When again the heat reached him, he could only turn and leap back. He could not bear it. Four times indeed—four times in all—he was thus to act and try; then no more could he cast himself into the fire. For then [he might try] only four times.

And when he had ended [trying] four times, thereupon they cried out to Nanauatzin. The gods said to him: "Onward, thou, O Nanauatzin! Take heart!"

And Nanauatzin, daring all at once, determined—resolved—hardened his heart, and shut firmly his eyes. He had no fear; he did not stop short; he did not falter in fright; he did not turn back. All at once he quickly threw and cast himself into the fire; once and for all he went. Thereupon he burned; his body crackled and sizzled.

And when Tecaciztecatl saw that already he burned, then, afterwards, he cast himself upon [the fire]. Thereupon he also burned. . . .

. . . And after this, when both had cast themselves into the flames, when they had already burned, then the gods sat waiting [to see] where Nanauatzin would come to rise—he who first fell into the fire—in order that he might shine [as the sun]; in order that dawn might break.

When the gods had sat and been waiting for a long time, thereupon began the reddening [of the dawn]; in all directions, all around, the dawn and light extended. And so, they say, thereupon the gods fell upon their knees in order to await where he who had become the sun would come to rise. . . .

. . . And when the sun came to rise, when he burst forth, he appeared to be red; he kept swaying from side to side. It was impossible to look into his face; he blinded one with his light. Intensely did he shine. He issued rays of light from himself; his rays reached in all directions; his brilliant rays penetrated everywhere.

And afterwards Tecuciztecatl came to rise, following behind him from the same place—the east—near where the sun had come bursting forth. In the same manner that they had fallen into the fire, just so they came forth. They came following each other.

And so they tell it; [so] they relate the story and repeat the legend: Exactly equal had they become in their appearance, as they shone. When the gods saw them, [thus] exactly the same in their aspect, then once more there was deliberation. They said: "How may this be, O gods? Will they perchance both together follow the same path? Will they both shine together?"

And the gods all issued a judgment. They said: "Thus will this be; thus will this be done."

Then one of the gods came out running. With a rabbit he came to wound in the face this Tecucizetecatl; with it he darkened his face; he killed its brilliance. Thus doth it [the moon] appear today.

And when this was done, when both appeared [over the earth] together, they could, on the other hand, not move nor follow their paths. They could only remain still and motionless. So once again the gods spoke: "How shall we live? The sun cannot move. Shall we perchance live among common folk? [Let] this be, that through us the sun may be revived. Let all of us die."

Sources

[#3] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, "The Festival in the Month of Tóxcatl," vol. 1 (Mexico, DF: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938, pp. 990–991), tr. Carolyn Morrow.
"Book 7: The Sun, Moon, and Stars, and the Binding of the Years," *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain.*, trs. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, Part VIII (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1953), pp. 3–9.

[#4] from *Monarchia Indiana* (Juan de Torquemada, 1609–15)

Chimalpopoca's Victory in Death

With this decision he called some Mexicans and told them his intention, and declared to them the insult that it would cause to them, if perhaps he should die at the hand of King Maxtla, for the case of Tayatzin, because they would baptize this deed with the name of treachery, and that it was not reasonable that this be said of a Mexican King. And although

they ought to "make a sentiment," that is, be sad about it, the Mexicans came to the will of Chimalpopoca, and it seems to be thus true and then the King put in execution the plan that he had, for which (pointing out the Day) he dressed in the clothes of his god Huitzilopuchtli, and with him many Principal Gentleman and Ladies who were to die along with him, and they began to dance, and at the determined hour, when they began similar dances of sacrifices, to sacrifice their offering to the Devil, the Minister began to kill those who were dancing by his order. But as the event was public, there did not fail to be someone who went to Maxtla with the news. He quickly sent people to arrive on time so they could take Chimalpopoca, before the Priests killed him and offered him in sacrifice, and by luck it ought to be, so that he wouldn't take that glory of having killed himself and offered [himself] in offering and holocaust to his false God. And it is clear this is his intention; because if it were other, not only would his death not give him (Maxtla) pain, but rather he would rejoice on knowing that he (Chimalpopoca) was dead; since he already thought him an enemy of his kingdom. Maxtla's people arrived at the place and area where the sacrifice was being carried out at the moment when there were only two more to be sacrificed, after which, as the final conclusion of the sacrifice, Chimalpopoca would die. And arriving suddenly without being heard, they caught him and carried (him) with his clothes in which he was dressed and put him in a very strong cage, that served him as a jail. The Mexicans wanted to take up arms in defense of their King; but as the Tepenecas were many, and they came ready for war, and they (the Mexicans) were having a fiesta, and unworried, their anger that this deed caused them had no effect, and the Tepanecas went away with their King Chimalpopoca very contentedly. King Chimalpopoca [was] imprisoned. . . .

In this cage, they had Chimalpopoca imprisoned and sad, giving him ounces to eat, and seeing himself there and knowing that they had to take him from the cage to give him a cruel and rigorous death, he arranged to kill himself; and so he hanged himself in that jail where he was; considering a better death the one that his hands could give him than the one that he might receive from his enemies, as it was he triumphing over himself rather than his enemy triumphing over him, as Cleopatra and other valiant and strong pagan captains did, who because of being strong, carried out similar deeds in order not to see themselves in foreign hands, with shame and diminished valor and greatness.

And this is the death and the end of this unfortunate King, the third of Mexico, and this death, here related, I have seen it painted in two different histories . . . and when I was doing part of these investigations in Mexico City, with old and wise people, there was among them a man more than sixty years old, and the one who was explaining to me the paintings in the book that we were examining said to me: Father, have this old man speak because he knows this story better than I, for he had understanding of it; and turning toward him, he said, why do you not speak? Since you are a limb from that trunk, and asking the old man about the event, the old man told me he was a descendant of King Chimalpopoca, and that it was true, that he had died hanged, and had given himself that death, in order not die at the hands of Maxtla, who would have achieved glory and dishonored the Mexican people.

Source

[#4] "Chimalpopoca's Victory in Death," from Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquia Indiana*, 3rd edition, vol. 1 (Mexico: Editorial Salvador Chavez Hayhoe, 1943, pp. 123–126), tr. Carolyn Morrow.

[#5] from *In Defense of the Indians* (Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1548–50)

The Significance of Human Sacrifice

By nature, all nations know that God surpasses anything that can be imagined and that they have life and every possession from him. And by nature they understand that they owe God the greatest reverence and worship because of his incomparable excellence and majesty, and all agree that the principal act of *lalria*, which is owed to God alone, is sacrifice. It follows, then, that they are obliged by the natural law to offer sacrifice, by which men show, more than by any other external act, that they are grateful and subject to God. And so there has never been a nation so barbarous as not to judge by a natural impulse that sacrifice is owed to the true God or to him whom they mistakenly thought is the true God.

The second proof of the first statement is what Saint Thomas says: At all times and among all nations there has always been some offering of sacrifices. And the reason for this is that natural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him, and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name of God, and consequently the offering of sacrifice is a matter of the natural law.

. . . On the basis of these principles one can arrive at what we taught previously: within the limits of the natural light of reason (in other words, at the point at which divine or human positive law ceases and, one may add, where grace and doctrine are lacking), men should sacrifice human victims to the true God or the reputed god, if the latter is taken for the true God. We draw this conclusion: Just as men naturally know that God exists and think that there is nothing better or greater than he, since whatever we own, are, or are capable of is given to us by his boundless goodness, we do not adequately repay him even if we offer him all that is ours, even our life.

The greatest way to worship God is to offer him sacrifice. This is the unique act by which we show him to whom we offer the sacrifice that we are subject to him and grateful to him. Furthermore, nature teaches that it is just to offer God, whose debtors we admit we are for so many reasons, those things that are precious and excellent because of the surpassing excellence of his majesty. But, according to human judgment and truth, nothing in nature is greater or more valuable than the life of man or man himself. Therefore nature itself dictates and teaches those who do not have faith, grace, or doctrine, who live within the limitations of the light of nature, that in spite of every contrary positive law, they ought to sacrifice human victims to the true God or to the false god who is thought to be true, so that by offering a supremely precious thing they might be more grateful for the many favors they have received. For the natural law teaches gratitude in such a way that we not only do good to our benefactor but also try to repay him in an abundant manner for the benefits we have received, giving due consideration to the benefits, the benefactor, and the motive for which he confers the benefits on us.

The kindness by which the Lord created us, endowed us with so many gifts, and enriched us with so many good things comes from his immense charity and boundless goodness and gives birth in us to innumerable good things, and even life itself, and finally, whatever we are. However, since we cannot give adequate thanks for so many favors, we are obliged to present what seems to us to be the greatest and most valuable good, that is human life, and especially when the offering

is made for the welfare of the state. For the pagans thought that through sacrifices of this type they could divert evils from their state and gain good will and prosperity for their kingdoms. Therefore whoever sacrifices men to God can be drawn to this action by natural reason, especially if he lacks Christian faith and instruction. . . .

Possibly the idea of human sacrifice spread from here through the whole world. Yet someone will loudly protest that this idea must not be admitted, since innocent persons are sacrificed against their will. But I shall answer this objection as I have previously: Every man, no matter how innocent he may be, owes God more than his life; and so, although these persons do not will it by an explicit act, yet they perform an act that is owed, since all men are obliged to give their blood and their life whenever God's honor demands it. We Christians, like all those who knew God during the early centuries, are obliged by divine law to do this. Now apparently there was a case in which God's honor was involved when those upon whom the lot fell were offered as sacrifice by reason of a law in force in some kingdom. Therefore, even if they were otherwise innocent, no harm was done to them, at least in the judgment of those who did not have grace and doctrine. And this is bolstered by the fact that, according to the Philosopher, any outstanding citizen is obliged to give his life for the welfare of the state (this welfare, according to the erroneous opinion of the pagans, was thought to consist of the worship of the gods). Those who do not have the faith, then, have probable error concerning human sacrifice.

. . . But if the need of the state demands that a man do or undergo all that he is capable of, that is, that he expose his life to the danger of death for the welfare of the state, undoubtedly the legislator, by his command, can lawfully oblige by the natural law to obey the mandate. This is proved from what was established just a short while ago concerning the whole and the part. For, since the citizen is a part of the whole state and his happiness or welfare depends on the welfare and good of the state, he is obliged to love the common welfare and good more than his private welfare, and therefore, in order to preserve that common welfare, he is obliged by the natural law to do and suffer all he can, even by sacrificing his life.

Since, then, the pagans believe that the universal good and welfare of the whole state consists in sacrifices and immolations, that is, human victims, as we have proved elsewhere from Augustine, Chrysostom, and Valerius, it is not surprising that, when afflicted by needs, they sacrifice what in the judgment of all is most precious and pleasing to God, that is, men. This is evident from the previously cited examples. This is evident also from what Titus Livy writes: "When their city was in very great danger, the Romans placated Mars by sacrificing a man and woman of Gaul and a Greek man and woman." Moreover, on the supposition that the error of the pagans is probable, a legislator can and should bind some of the people by his command when there is a great need involving the whole state, so that a sacrifice should be offered by killing them. And they can be obliged to will this by an explicit act, as is clear from what has been concluded.

You see, then, dear reader, that there is some probable natural reason by which men can be led to sacrifice human beings to God and, as a result, that it is not easy to persuade the Indians, within a short period or by a few words, to refrain from their traditional practice of human sacrifice. . . .

. . . All of the preceding conclusions seem to be established, and therefore it can be persuasively argued, from the fact that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice to him his only son Isaac, that it is not altogether detestable to sacrifice human beings to God. . . .

. . . Thus it is clear that it is not possible, quickly and in a few words, to make clear to unbelievers, especially ours, that sacrificing men to God is unnatural. On that account, we are

left with the evident conclusion that knowledge that the natives sacrifice men to their gods, or even eat human flesh, is not a just cause for waging war on any kingdom. And again, this long-standing practice of theirs cannot be suddenly uprooted. And so these entirely guiltless Indians are not to be blamed because they do not come to their senses at the first words of a preacher of the gospel. For they do not understand the preacher. Nor are they bound to abandon at once their ancestral religion, for they do not understand that it is better to do so. Nor is human sacrifice—even of the innocent, when it is done for the welfare of the entire state—so contrary to natural reason that it must be immediately detested as contrary to the dictates of nature. For this error can owe its origin to a plausible proof developed by human reasoning.

The preceding arguments prove that those who willingly allow themselves to be sacrificed, and all the common people in general, and the ministers who sacrifice them to the gods by command of their rulers and priests labor under an excusable, invincible ignorance and that their error should be judged leniently, even if we were to suppose that there is some judge with authority to punish these sins. If they offend God by these sacrifices, he alone will punish this sin of human sacrifice. . . .

Source

[#5] "The Significance of Human Sacrifice," Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians. The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas*, ch. 37, ed. and tr. Stafford Poole (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974, pp. 239–243).

MAYA

[#6] from *Popol Vuh*
(dictated in K'iche', c. 1554–58; Francisco Ximénez, c. 1701)

How the People Obtained Fire

And they did not have fire. Only the people of Tohil had it. He was the god of the tribes which first created fire. It is not known how it was made, because it was already burning when Balam-Quitzé and Balam-Acab saw it.

"Ah, we have no fire yet! We shall die of cold," they said. Then Tohil said to them: "Do not worry! Yours shall be the lost fire which is talked of. Yours shall be what is spoken of as lost fire," Tohil said to them.

"Really? Oh, God, our support, our maintenance, thou, our God!" they said, returning thanks.

And Tohil answered: "Very well, certainly I am your God; so shall it be! I am your Lord; so let it be!" Thus it was told to the priests and sacrificers by Tohil. And in this manner the tribes received fire and they were joyful because of it.

Instantly a great shower began to fall when the fire of the tribes was burning. Much hail fell on all the tribes and the fire was put out because of it, and again the fire was extinguished.

Then Balam-Quitzé and Balam-Acab again asked Tohil for fire. "Oh, Tohil, we are truly dying of cold!" they said to Tohil.

"Very well, do not worry," Tohil answered, and instantly he made fire, turning about in his shoe.

Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam were at once happy and immediately they became warm.

Now, the fire of the peoples [of Vucamag] had also gone out and they were dying of cold. Immediately they came to ask Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam for fire. They could no longer bear the cold nor the ice; they were shivering and their teeth were chattering; they were numb; their legs and hands shook and they could not hold anything in them, when they came.

"We are not ashamed to come before you, to beg for a little of your fire," they said. But they were not well received. And then the tribes were very sad.

"The speech of Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam is different! Oh! We have given up our speech! What have we done? We are lost. How were we deceived? We had only one speech when we arrived there at Tulán; we were created and educated in the same way. It is not good what we have done," said all the tribes under the trees, under the vines.

Then a man came before Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam and [this man], who was a messenger of Xibalba, spoke thus: "This is, in truth, your God; this is your support; this is, furthermore, the representation, the memory of your Creator and Maker. Do not give your fire to the tribes until they present offerings to Tohil. It is not necessary that they give anything to you. Ask Tohil what they should give when they come to receive fire," said the man from Xibalba. He had wings like the wings of a bat. "I am sent by your Creator, your Maker," said the man of Xibalba.

They were filled with joy then, and Tohil, Avilix, and Hacavitz were also gladdened when the man from Xibalba spoke, who disappeared instantly from their presence.

But the tribes did not perish when they came, although they were dying of cold. There was much hail, black rain and mist, and indescribable cold.

All the tribes were trembling and shivering with cold when they came where Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam were. Their hearts were greatly troubled and their mouths and eyes were sad.

In a moment the beggars came before Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui- Balam and said: "Will you not have pity on us, we only ask a little of your fire? Perchance, were we not [once] together and reunited? Did we not have the same home and one country when we were created, when we were made? Have mercy, then, on us!" they said.

"What will you give us so that we shall have mercy on you?" they were asked. "Well, then, we shall give you money," the tribes answered. "We do not want money," said Balam-Quitzé and Balam-Acab. "And what do you want?" [asked the tribes].

"We shall ask now" [said Balam-Quitzé].

"Very well," said the tribes.

"We shall ask Tohil and then we shall tell you," they answered.

"What must the tribes give, oh, Tohil! who have come to ask for your fire?" said Balam- Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam.

"Well! Are they willing to give their waist and their armpits? Do they want me to embrace them? For if they do not want to do that, neither shall I give them fire," answered Tohil.

"Tell them that this shall come later, that they do not have to come now to give me their waist and their armpits. This is what Tohil orders us to tell you, you will say." This was the answer to Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui-Balam.

Then they took Tohil's message. "Very well, we shall join you and we shall embrace him," they [the people] said when they heard and were told the message from Tohil. And they did not delay in acting. "Good," they said, "but may it be soon!" And immediately they received the fire. Then they became warm. . . .

The Cakchiquel did not ask for the fire, because they did not want to give themselves up to be overcome, the way that the other tribes had been overcome when they offered their breasts and their armpits so that they would be opened. And this was the opening [of the breasts] about which Tohil had spoken; that they should sacrifice all the tribes before him, that they should tear out their hearts from their breasts. . . .

Source

[#6] *The Book of the People: Popul Vuh*, trs. Delia Goetz, Sylvanus Griswold Morley, and Adrián Recino (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1954), Part II, chs. 12, 13, 14; Part III, chs. 5, 6. Available online at sacred-texts.org.

[#7] from *Account of the Affairs of Yucatán* (Diego de Landa, c. 1570)

Ixtab: Goddess of the Gallows

The Maya have always believed in the immortality of the soul more than many other peoples—even though they may not be so civilized—for they believed that there was a more excellent life after death which the soul enjoyed on departure from the body. They said that this future life was divided into a good and a bad life, into a painful one and one full of peace. They said that the bad and the painful one was for the wicked and the good and delightful one for those who had lived well according to their beliefs. The easy life, which they said they would achieve if they were good, was to go to a very pleasant place where nothing would give them pain, and where they would have an abundance of food and drink of great sweetness and a tree which is there called *yaxche*, which is very cool and shady (and is a cotton tree), beneath whose branches and shade they would all rest and take pleasure for eternity.

The punishment for a bad life, which they said that the wrongdoers would have to suffer, was to go to a lower place than the others, which they call *Mitnal*, meaning Hell, and there to be tormented by devils and by great extremes of hunger, cold, fatigue, and misery. There was also in this place a devil and prince of all the devils whom all obeyed, and they called him in their tongue *Hunhau*: They claimed that these good and evil lives had no end, because the soul had none. They also said, and held it to be absolutely true, that those who hanged themselves went to this heaven of theirs. Thus there were many who for slight reasons of sadness, troubles, or sickness hanged themselves in order to escape and to go and rest in their heaven where they said the goddess of the gallows, whom they called *Ixtab*, came to take them. They had no concept of the resurrection of the body and had no record of the person from whom they had heard about this heaven and hell of theirs.

Source

[#7] "Ixtab: Goddess of the Gallows," from A. R. Pagden, ed. and tr., *The Maya: Diego de Landa's Account of the Affairs of Yucatán* (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hara, 1975, p. 95; quotation in introduction, p. 16).

CARIBBEAN

[#8] from *Natural History of the West Indies* (Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, 1526)

Suicide on the Death of the Chief

This species of poisonous yuca grows in great abundance on the islands of San Juan [Puerto Rico], Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola.

In some of the islands where the poisonous yuca is found, occasionally there has been some Indian chief or leader and many of his subjects who have committed suicide. The chief, through the exhortations of the devil, would tell all those who wanted to die with him the reason that he thought would draw them to their diabolical end. Then each one would take swallows of the water or juice of the yuca and suddenly they would all die without any help whatsoever.

In many places of Tierra Firme when a *cacique* or some lord dies, all the retainers of his household, both men and women, kill themselves. The devil has led them to believe that those who commit suicide when the chief dies will go with him to heaven and there serve him food and drink or continue the same work they have done in the home or the *cacique* on earth.

Those who do not do this, they believe, when they die of some other cause, or naturally, their spirits die with the body. And all the other Indians and vassals of the chief, when they die, as has been said, their spirits die with the body. And so they die and are converted into air or into nothingness, as would happen to a pig, a bird, a fish, or any other animal. They believe that only the servants and vassals who serve the master in the house or in some particular service have and enjoy that right and pre-eminence.

From that false belief it results that even those who are engaged in the cultivation of corn kill themselves in order to enjoy this blessing, and have themselves buried with a little corn and a small wooden sword. The Indians say that it is carried with them so that if in heaven there is a lack of seed, they will have enough to begin their trade, until the devil, who informs them of everything, provides them with a larger quantity of seed.

In the highlands of Guaturo I was able to observe this very well. There I held prisoner the *cacique* of that province who had rebelled against the service of your Majesty. I asked him to explain to me the meaning of a number of graves that were in his house. He said they were the graves of Indians who had killed themselves when his father died. Since often they are buried with great quantities of wrought gold, I had two of the graves opened. There I found the corn and knives that I mentioned above. When I asked the reason, the *cacique* and some of his Indians said that those who had been buried there were farmers, men who knew well how to plant and harvest corn, and they were his and his father's servants. And so that their souls would not die

with their bodies, they had killed themselves upon the death of his father, and had the corn and knives for use in heaven.

I replied that the *cacique* should observe that the devil had deceived him, and that everything he told them was false, for those servants had been dead a long time and still had not carried away the corn and the knives. I also pointed out that now the seed was rotten and worthless, and that the dead had not planted anything in heaven. To this the *cacique* replied that if they had not carried those things away, it was because they had found plenty in heaven and those were not needed. They were told many things about this error of theirs, from which they profit little, to remove them from their way of error, especially when they are grown men and the devil already has them ensnared.

Source

[#8] "Suicide at the Death of the Chief," from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Natural History of the West Indies*, tr. and ed. Sterling A. Stoudemire (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1959, pp. 17, 35–37).

[#9] from *La Historia General de las Indias* (Francisco López de Gómara, 1552)

Suicide, Smallpox, and the Arrival of the Spaniards

Of all their laws, this is the most notable, that for whatever theft they impaled the thief, they also abhorred the avaricious a lot. They bury with the men, especially with the gentlemen, some of their most beloved women, or the most beautiful, for that is a great honor and favor. Other women want to be buried with them for love. The burial of these is ostentatious, they seat them on the tomb, and they put around them bread, water, salt, fruit, and arms.

. . . [Prediction of the coming of the long beards, who will conquer the people with their shining swords. . . .]

All these things happened exactly as those priests related and sang, for the Spaniards opened many Indians with knife thrusts in the wars, and even in the mines and struck down the idols on their altars without leaving one. They forbade all the rites and ceremonies that they found. They made them slaves through the actions where they divided them up, as a result of which they worked more than they used to, and in the case of others, they died and all killed themselves. Of the 15 times 100 thousand and more persons that there were on that single island, now there are only 500. Some died of hunger, others from work, and many from poxes. Some killed themselves with yucca juice, and others with poisonous herbs, others hanged themselves from the trees. The women acted like their husbands, they hanged themselves alongside them [their husbands], and aborted their children with art and drink, so as not to bear children who would serve strangers. It must have been a punishment that God gave them for their sins, but the first [the Spaniards] were greatly at fault for treating them very badly, inflamed with desire for gold more than [for the welfare] of their fellow [human beings].

Source

[#9] "Suicide, Smallpox, and the Arrival of the Spaniards," from Francisco López de Gómara, *La Historia General de las Indias* (En Anvers: Casa de Juan Steelsio, 1554, pp. 35–36, 40), tr. Carolyn Morrow.

[#10] from *History of the New World* (Girolamo Benzoni, 1565)

Suffering at the Hands of the Spaniards

Then other governors were successively sent to *La Espanola*, as well clerical as secular, till the natives, finding themselves intolerably oppressed and worked on every side, with no chance of regaining their liberty, with sighs and tears longed for death.

Wherefore many went to the woods and there hung themselves, after having killed their children, saying it was far better to die rather than to live so miserably, serving such and so many ferocious tyrants and wicked thieves. The women, with the juice of a certain herb, dissipated their pregnancy, in order not to produce children, and then following the example of their husbands, hung themselves. Some threw themselves from high cliffs down precipices; others jumped into the sea; others again into rivers; and others starved themselves to death. Sometimes they killed themselves with their flint knives; others pierce their bosoms or their sides with pointed stakes. Finally, out of the two millions of original inhabitants, through the number of suicides and other deaths, occasioned by the oppressive labour and cruelties imposed by the Spaniards, there are not a hundred and fifty now to be found: and this has been their way of making Christians of them. What befell those poor islanders has happened also to all the others around: Cuba, Jamaica, Porto Rico, and other places. And although an almost infinite number of the inhabitants of the mainland have been brought to these islands as slaves, they have nearly all since died. In short, I may say, that wherever the Spaniards have unfurled their banner, they have, by their great cruelties, inspired the inhabitants with perpetual hatred of those chiefs having heard of the horrors committed by the Spaniards wherever they went, took up arms to resist them and to defend their liberty. Yet finding, after many battles, that they were always beaten, and that already a great proportion of them were killed, and moreover, that daily reinforcements of Christians arrived from Carthagena and Sta. Martha, their hopes failed of ever being able to expel them from their country, and, overpowered by the fear of being all destroyed, they sought for peace. Thus did the Spaniards obtain the dominion of a great part of that country. Then Don Pietro di Lugo, after enduring some skirmishes with the Indians, traversed many villages, burning and robbing, but collecting a great quantity of gold and emeralds, finally returned to *Sta. Martha*.

The oppressed natives seeing themselves persecuted in this manner on every side, were unable to sustain so much grief and suffering; abusing and inveighing against the Christian name, they used to go to the woods to hang themselves, the women as well as the men; and of those who had nothing to tie themselves up with, as they chiefly go naked, the one helped the other to tie their hair round the branches of the trees, and then letting themselves fall, with most bitter lamentations, with howls and shrieks full of terror, and filling the air with their miseries, persisted in making away with themselves.

Source

[#10] "Suffering at the Hands of the Spaniards," from Girolamo Benzoni, *History of the New World*, tr. and ed. Rear-Admiral W. H. Smyth (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1857, pp. 77–78, 111–112).

SOUTH AMERICA

INCA

[#11] from *The Incas* (Pedro de Cieza de León, 1553)

The Burial of Wives

> Of how the Indians of these valleys and others of these kingdoms believe that the soul departs from the body and does not die, and why they ordered their wives interred in their tombs.

In the course of this history I have often alluded to the fact that in the greater part of this kingdom of Peru it is a very widespread custom generally observed by all the Indians to bury with the bodies of the dead all those possessions they most prized, and certain of their most beautiful and best-loved women. . . .

. . . These Indians, blinded by the words and figments of the devil, believing these fictions, gave more thought to adorning their graves or tombs than to any other thing. And when the chief died, they put with him his treasures, living women and boys, and other persons who were good friends of his when he was alive. Thus, as can be seen from what I have said, it was the general belief among all these Yunga Indians, and also the mountaineers of this kingdom of Peru, that the souls of the dead did not die, but lived forever, and came together with one another in the other world, where, as I said before, they believe that they take their pleasure and eat and drink, which is their chief delight. And firmly believing this, they buried with the dead their best-loved wives, and their closest vassals and servants, and their most prized possessions and arms and feathers, and other ornaments of their person. And many of their kinfolk, for whom there was no room in the tomb, dug holes in the fields and lands of the dead lord, or in those spots where he was most wont to sport and pleasure himself, and laid themselves in them, thinking that his soul would pass by those spots and take them along to serve him. There were even women who, to have more of a claim on him and so he would value their services more, fearing there would not be room for them in the tomb, hanged themselves by their own hair and killed themselves in this way. We all believe all these things to be true because the tombs of the dead make it manifest, and because in many places they still hold and follow this cursed custom.

Source

[#11] "The Burial of Wives," Pedro de Cieza de León, *The Incas*, tr. Harriet de Onis, ed. Victor Wolfgang von Hagen (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959, pp. 308–310).

[#12] from *Natural & Moral History of the Indies* (José de Acosta, 1589)

Of Superstitions They Used to the Dead

The Indians of Peru beleeved commonly that the Soules lived after this life, and that the good were in glorie and the bad in paine; so as there is little difficultie to perswade them to these articles. But they are not yet come to the knowledge of that point, that the bodies should rise with the soules. And therefore they did vse a wonderfull care, as it is saide, to preserve the bodies which they honoured after death; to this end their successors gave them garments, and made sacrifices vnto them, especially the kings Yncas, being accompanied at their funeralls with a great number of servants and women for his service in the other life and therefore on the day of his decease they did put to death the woman he had loved best, his servants and officers, that they might serve him in the other life.

Whenas Huayna Ccapac died (who was father to Atahualpa, at what time the Spaniards entered), they put to death aboue a thousand persons of all ages and conditions, for his service, to accompany him in the other life; after many songs and drunkennes they slew them; and these that were appointed to death, held themselves happy.

Source

[#12] "Of the Superstitions They Used to the Dead," from José de Acosta, *Natural & Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Clements R. Markham, vol. II (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1880, pp. 313–314).

[#13] from *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru* (Pablo José de Arriaga, 1621)

What Those Who Hang Themselves Really Are

They do not dismiss those who hang themselves because of what they are. [They consider them] something more than human, and they invoke them, and call on them for some things, and it could be that this was one of the reasons why in some areas some hang themselves so easily, like the other Indian boy and prince, who while enjoying himself some months in a fiesta or drinking occasion with some Indians with whom he was not very friendly, he said one day, at the beginning of the night and at the end of the fiesta, and they understood that he said it while he tapped his feet, I have to see who among you has good will toward me, if he will come to hang himself with me and with this he left the house, and going to search for him here and there, thinking that he had gone a distance away, they came to find him hanged near the very house. And it must have been a little more than a month ago, that the judge holding a sorcerer prisoner with a pair of irons, and not having pressured or squeezed him at all, instead

treating him well and feeding him from his own table, after he had been a prisoner for two days in his own room, he went out of it one night, without being heard, and with a piece of a very thin cord like those they wear on their head, which they call huaraca, he hanged himself at the door of the house, in such a way that he remained on his knees and in this posture I found him and ran into him in front of our chamber in the morning when I went out at dawn. We had him taken away outside of the town, being dragged by the feet, and burned him so that he would be a lesson for others.

Source

[#13] "What Those Who Hang Themselves Really Are," from Pablo José de Arriaga, *La Extirpacion de la Idolatria en el Peru* [1621] (Lima: Imprenta y Libreria Sanmarti, 1920, pp. 61, tr. Carolyn Morrow).

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MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (1533–1592)

from *Of Cannibals* (in Archive only)

from *A Custom of the Isle of Cea* (expanded in Archive)

Lord Michel Eyquem Montaigne was born near Bordeaux, the son of the mayor of Bordeaux, a man of unusual tolerance in an age of religious intolerance. Raised speaking only Latin until the age of six, Montaigne received the very best education; he completed a 12-year course of study at the College de Guyenne in only seven years and continued his education in the study of law at the University of Toulouse.

Montaigne served as counselor in the Bordeaux Parliament from 1557 to 1570. During this time, he was a courtier at the court of Charles the IX, from 1561 to 1563, and made the closest friendship of his life with Étienne de La Boétie, a poet who shared Montaigne's interest in classical

antiquity. Montaigne was deeply affected by the way in which La Boétie stoically accepted his death from dysentery in 1563. Montaigne and his wife, Françoise de la Chassaigne, whom he married in 1565, had six daughters, but only one of them survived childhood. Montaigne's father died in 1568 leaving him the Chateau de Montaigne, the family estate, to which Montaigne retired in 1570 to begin work on his Essays. *In 1580, Montaigne came out of seclusion to travel to Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy, returning reluctantly to serve as mayor of Bordeaux for four years. Running from war and the plague, in 1586, Montaigne was forced to flee his estate; he returned shortly to the pillaged castle.*

Montaigne's lasting influence rests in his Essays, *which exercised considerable influence on French and English literature; Montaigne is regarded as the inventor of the modern essay. In an unabashed, intimately personal manner previously unknown in the literature of his day, he displayed the humanism of the time, arguing that the only suitable subjects for study were mankind and the human condition, subjects that he approached by describing his own thoughts, habits, and experiences in great detail. He espoused a philosophy of toleration, stoicism in the face of suffering, and skepticism, and although he remained a professing Catholic, he challenged almost all received views of theology, philosophy, religion, science, and morality. He played a major role in the development of Christian sceptical fideism.*

In the excerpt "Of Cannibals" from his Essays, *Montaigne portrays the death of a Brazilian native, an enemy about to be eaten, in terms of absolute Stoic virtue. While he uses the classical Stoic sources, Montaigne implies that the attitude toward death among the Brazilian cannibals is more philosophically Stoic than that of the Europeans. This essay is supposed to be the original source of the "noble savage" idea later associated with Rousseau.*

In the essay "A Custom of the Isle of Cea" (1573–74), Montaigne explores positive justifications for suicide, especially for "unendurable pain" and "fear of a worse death." Here he juxtaposes, as he often did, many conflicting views on an issue. He mentions Pliny's [q.v., under Pliny the Elder] belief that only three sorts of diseases license suicide, the most painful of which is bladder stone; Montaigne himself suffered considerably from stone and repeatedly sought a cure. It is noteworthy that Montaigne uses almost exclusively classical material, ignoring the enormous body of Christian theological commentary of the time. He is the first significant modern figure, together with his friend and disciple Pierre Charron (1541–1603), a sceptical Catholic priest, to question the Christian position on suicide, opening the door to a shift in thinking that would occur in the following century even as writers like John Sym [q.v.] were emphasizing the heinousness of suicide. As one contemporary scholar puts it, in arguing for a naturalistic and merely personal basis for suicide, Montaigne and Charron "opened a Pandora's box."

Sources

Essays of Michel de Montaigne, ed. William Carew Hazlitt, tr. Charles Cotton (1686), Kensington, 1877, "Of Cannibals," Book the First, Chapter XXX; "A Custom of the Isle of Cea," Book the Second, Chapter Three (Latin quotations removed). Both available online at www.gutenberg.org from the Gutenberg Project, text #3600. Quotation and paraphrase in introductory material from Gary B. Ferngren, "The Ethics of Suicide in the Renaissance and Reformation," in Baruch A. Brody, ed., *Suicide and Euthanasia: Historical and Contemporary Themes*, Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 161–162.

from A CUSTOM OF THE ISLE OF CEA

. . . [T]here are several accidents in life far worse to suffer than death itself. Witness the Lacedaemonian boy taken by Antigonus, and sold for a slave, who being by his master commanded to some base employment: "Thou shalt see," says the boy, "whom thou hast bought; it would be a shame for me to serve, being so near the reach of liberty," and having so said, threw himself from the top of the house. . . . This is the meaning of the sentence, "That the wise man lives as long as he ought, not so long as he can; and that the most obliging present Nature has made us, and which takes from us all colour of complaint of our condition, is to have delivered into our own custody the keys of life; she has only ordered, one door into life, but a hundred thousand ways out. . . ." Why dost thou complain of this world? it detains thee not; thy own cowardice is the cause, if thou livest in pain. There needs no more to die but to will to die:

> Death is everywhere: heaven has well provided for that. Any one
> may deprive us of life; no one can deprive us of death. To death
> there are a thousand avenues. [Seneca, Theb.]

Neither is it a recipe for one disease only; death is the infallible cure of all; 'tis a most assured port that is never to be feared, and very often to be sought. It comes all to one, whether a man give himself his end, or stays to receive it by some other means; whether he pays before his day, or stay till his day of payment come; from whencesoever it comes, it is still his. . . . The most voluntary death is the finest. Life depends upon the pleasure of others; death upon our own. We ought not to accommodate ourselves to our own humour in anything so much as in this. Reputation is not concerned in such an enterprise; 'tis folly to be concerned by any such apprehension. Living is slavery if the liberty of dying be wanting. The ordinary method of cure is carried on at the expense of life; they torment us with caustics, incisions, and amputations of limbs; they interdict aliment and exhaust our blood; one step farther and we are cured indeed and effectually. . . . The Stoics say, that it is living according to nature in a wise man to, take his leave of life, even in the height of prosperity, if he do it opportunely; and in a fool to prolong it, though he be miserable, provided he be not indigent of those things which they repute to be according to nature. As I do not offend the law against thieves when I embezzle my own money and cut my own purse; nor that against incendiaries when I burn my own wood; so am I not under the lash of those made against murderers for having deprived myself of my own life. Hegesias said, that as the condition of life did, so the condition of death ought to depend upon our own choice. And Diogenes meeting the philosopher Speusippus, so blown up with an inveterate dropsy that he was fain to be carried in a litter, and by him saluted with the compliment, "I wish you good health." "No health to thee," replied the other, "who art content to live in such a condition."

And in fact, not long after, Speusippus, weary of so languishing a state of life, found a means to die.

But this does not pass without admitting a dispute: for many are of opinion that we cannot quit this garrison of the world without the express command of Him who has placed us in it; and that it appertains to God who has placed us here, not for ourselves only but for His glory and the service of others, to dismiss us when it shall best please Him, and not for us to depart

without His licence: that we are not born for ourselves only, but for our country also, the laws of which require an account from us upon the score of their own interest, and have an action of manslaughter good against us; and if these fail to take cognisance of the fact, we are punished in the other world as deserters of our duty:

> Thence the sad ones occupy the next abodes, who, though free
> from guilt, were by their own hands slain, and, hating light,
> sought death. [Virgil, Aeneid]

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Among those of the first of these two opinions, there has been great debate, what occasions are sufficient to justify the meditation of self-murder, which they call "A reasonable exit" [Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Zeno*]. For though they say that men must often die for trivial causes, seeing those that detain us in life are of no very great weight, yet there is to be some limit. There are fantastic and senseless humours that have prompted not only individual men, but whole nations to destroy themselves, of which I have elsewhere given some examples; and we further read of the Milesian virgins, that by a frantic compact they hanged themselves one after another till the magistrate took order in it, enacting that the bodies of such as should be found so hanged should be drawn by the same halter stark naked through the city. When Therykion tried to persuade Cleomenes to despatch himself, by reason of the ill posture of his affairs, and, having missed a death of more honour in the battle he had lost, to accept of this the second in honour to it, and not to give the conquerors leisure to make him undergo either an ignominious death or an infamous life; Cleomenes, with a courage truly Stoic and Lacedaemonian, rejected his counsel as unmanly and mean; "that," said he, "is a remedy that can never be wanting, but which a man is never to make use of, whilst there is an inch of hope remaining": telling him, "that it was sometimes constancy and valour to live; that he would that even his death should be of use to his country, and would make of it an act of honour and virtue." Therykion, notwithstanding, thought himself in the right, and did his own business; and Cleomenes afterwards did the same, but not till he had first tried the utmost malevolence of fortune. All the inconveniences in the world are not considerable enough that a man should die to evade them; and, besides, there being so many, so sudden and unexpected changes in human things, it is hard rightly to judge when we are at the end of our hope. . . .

All things, says an old adage, are to be hoped for by a man while he lives; ay, but, replies Seneca, why should this rather be always running in a man's head that fortune can do all things for the living man, than this, that fortune has no power over him that knows how to die? Josephus, when engaged in so near and apparent danger, a whole people being violently bent against him, that there was no visible means of escape, nevertheless, being, as he himself says, in this extremity counselled by one of his friends to despatch himself, it was well for him that he yet maintained himself in hope, for fortune diverted the accident beyond all human expectation, so that he saw himself delivered without any manner of inconvenience. . . .

> Length of days, and the various labour of changeful time, have
> brought things to a better state; fortune turning, shews a reverse
> face, and again restores men to prosperity. [Aeneid, xi, 425]

. . . And some there have been who, to avoid a worse death, have chosen one to their own liking. Democritus, general of the Aetolians, being brought prisoner to Rome, found means to make his escape by night: but close pursued by his keepers, rather than suffer himself to be retaken, he fell upon his own sword and died. Antinous and Theodotus, their city of Epirus being reduced by the Romans to the last extremity, gave the people counsel universally to kill themselves; but, these preferring to give themselves up to the enemy, the two chiefs went to seek the death they desired, rushing furiously upon the enemy, with intention to strike home but not to ward a blow. The Island of Gozzo being taken some years ago by the Turks, a Sicilian, who had two beautiful daughters marriageable, killed them both with his own hand, and their mother, running in to save them, to boot, which having done, sallying out of the house with a cross-bow and harquebus, with two shots he killed two of the Turks nearest to his door, and drawing his sword, charged furiously in amongst the rest, where he was suddenly enclosed and cut to pieces, by that means delivering his family and himself from slavery and dishonour. The Jewish women, after having circumcised their children, threw them and themselves down a precipice to avoid the cruelty of Antigonus. . . . Scribonia advising her nephew Libo to kill himself rather than await the stroke of justice, told him that it was to do other people's business to preserve his life to put it after into the hands of those who within three or four days would fetch him to execution, and that it was to serve his enemies to keep his blood to gratify their malice. . . .

Of violences offered to the conscience, that against the chastity of woman is, in my opinion, most to be avoided, forasmuch as there is a certain pleasure naturally mixed with it, and for that reason the dissent therein cannot be sufficiently perfect and entire, so that the violence seems to be mixed with a little consent of the forced party. The ecclesiastical history has several examples of devout persons who have embraced death to secure them from the outrages prepared by tyrants against their religion and honour. Pelagia and Sophronia, both canonised, the first of these precipitated herself with her mother and sisters into the river to avoid being forced by some soldiers, and the last also killed herself to avoid being ravished by the Emperor Maxentius. . . .

History is everywhere full of those who by a thousand ways have exchanged a painful and irksome life for death. Lucius Aruntius killed himself, to fly, he said, both the future and the past. Granius Silvanus and Statius Proximus, after having been pardoned by Nero, killed themselves; either disdaining to live by the favour of so wicked a man, or that they might not be troubled, at some other time, to obtain a second pardon, considering the proclivity of his nature to suspect and credit accusations against worthy men. . . . Boges, governor in Eion for King Xerxes, being besieged by the Athenian army under the conduct of Cimon, refused the conditions offered, that he might safe return into Asia with all his wealth, impatient to survive the loss of a place his master had given him to keep; wherefore, having defended the city to the last extremity, nothing being left to eat, he first threw all the gold and whatever else the enemy could make booty of into the river Strymon, and then causing a great pile to be set on fire, and the throats of all the women, children, concubines, and servants to be cut, he threw their bodies into the fire, and at last leaped into it himself.

Ninachetuen, an Indian lord, so soon as he heard the first whisper of the Portuguese Viceroy's determination to dispossess him . . . caused a scaffold, more long than broad, to be erected, supported by columns royally adorned with tapestry and strewed with flowers and abundance of perfumes; all which being prepared, in a robe of cloth of gold, set full of jewels of great value, he came out into the street, and mounted the steps to the scaffold, at one corner of

which he had a pile lighted of aromatic wood. Everybody ran to see to what end these unusual preparations were made; when Ninachetuen, with a manly but displeased countenance, set forth how much he had obliged the Portuguese nation, and with how unspotted fidelity he had carried himself in his charge; that having so often, sword in hand, manifested in the behalf of others, that honour was much more dear to him than life, he was not to abandon the concern of it for himself: that fortune denying him all means of opposing the affront designed to be put upon him, his courage at least enjoined him to free himself from the sense of it, and not to serve for a fable to the people, nor for a triumph to men less deserving than himself; which having said he leaped into the fire.

Sextilia, wife of Scaurus, and Paxaea, wife of Labeo, to encourage their husbands to avoid the dangers that pressed upon them, wherein they had no other share than conjugal affection, voluntarily sacrificed their own lives to serve them in this extreme necessity for company and example. . . . Nothing can be added to the beauty of the death of the wife of Fulvius, a familiar favourite of Augustus: Augustus having discovered that he had vented an important secret he had entrusted him withal, one morning that he came to make his court, received him very coldly and looked frowningly upon him. He returned home, full of, despair, where he sorrowfully told his wife that, having fallen into this misfortune, he was resolved to kill himself: to which she roundly replied, "'Tis but reason you should, seeing that having so often experienced the incontinence of my tongue, you could not take warning: but let me kill myself first," and without any more saying ran herself through the body with a sword. . . .

Alexander, laying siege to a city of the Indies, those within, finding themselves very hardly set, put on a vigorous resolution to deprive him of the pleasure of his victory, and accordingly burned themselves in general, together with their city, in despite of his humanity: a new kind of war, where the enemies sought to save them, and they to destroy themselves, doing, to make themselves sure of death, all that men do to secure life.

Astapa, a city of Spain, finding itself weak in walls and defence to withstand the Romans, the inhabitants made a heap of all their riches and furniture in the public place; and, having ranged upon this heap all the women and children, and piled them round with wood and other combustible matter to take sudden fire, and left fifty of their young men for the execution of that whereon they had resolved, they made a desperate sally, where for want of power to overcome, they caused themselves to be every man slain. . . .

But men sometimes covet death out of hope of a greater good. "I desire," says St. Paul, "to be with Christ," and "who shall rid me of these bands?" . . . Jacques du Chastel, bishop of Soissons, in St. Louis's foreign expedition, seeing the king and whole army upon the point of returning into France, leaving the affairs of religion imperfect, took a resolution rather to go into Paradise; wherefore, having taken solemn leave of his friends, he charged alone, in the sight of every one, into the enemy's army, where he was presently cut to pieces. . . .

Sextus Pompeius, in his expedition into Asia, touched at the isle of Cea in Negropont: it happened whilst he was there, as we have it from one that was with him, that a woman of great quality, having given an account to her citizens why she was resolved to put an end to her life, invited Pompeius to her death, to render it the more honourable, an invitation that he accepted; and having long tried in vain by the power of his eloquence, which was very great, and persuasion, to divert her from that design, he acquiesced in the end in her own will. She had passed the age of four score and ten in a very happy state, both of body and mind; being then laid upon her bed, better dressed than ordinary and leaning upon her elbow. . . . "For my part, having always

experienced the smiles of fortune, for fear lest the desire of living too long may make me see a contrary face, I am going, by a happy end, to dismiss the remains of my soul, leaving behind two daughters of my body and a legion of nephews"; which having said, with some exhortations to her family to live in peace, she divided amongst them her goods, and recommending her domestic gods to her eldest daughter, she boldly took the bowl that contained the poison, and having made her vows and prayers to Mercury to conduct her to some happy abode in the other world, she roundly swallowed the mortal poison. . . .

Pliny tells us of a certain Hyperborean nation where, by reason of the sweet temperature of the air, lives rarely ended but by the voluntary surrender of the inhabitants, who, being weary of and satiated with living, had the custom, at a very old age, after having made good cheer, to precipitate themselves into the sea from the top of a certain rock, assigned for that service. Pain and the fear of a worse death seem to me the most excusable incitements.

ABU'L FAZL IBN MUBARAK (1551–1602)

From *Biography of the Emperor Akbar: On Jauhar and Saka*

Abu'l Fazl was born in Agra, the second son to the Indian scholar and teacher Shaikh Mubarak, who educated Abu'l Fazl from an early age in the Islamic sciences, Greek philosophy, and mysticism. At age 23, Abu'l Fazl was introduced to the court of emperor Akbar by his older brother Abu'l Faizi, the future poet laureate. A liberal thinker like his father, Abu'l Fazl quickly gained favor with the emperor and supported him in extending the religious tolerance of his empire. In 1579, together with his father, Abu'l Fazl helped to compose the decree known as the "Infallibility Decree," which endowed the emperor Akbar with religious superiority over the orthodox authority of the ulama. *In 1599, Abu'l Fazl was given his first office, at Deccan, where he was recognized for his ability as a military commander. Three years later in 1602, he was assassinated under secret orders from emperor Akbar's eldest son, the future emperor Jahangir, whose ascendancy and 1600 rebellion against his father Abu'l Fazl had opposed.*

Abu'l Fazl is best known today for his Akbarnama, *a three-volume history of the life and empire of its commissioner, the emperor Akbar. It was composed in Persian between 1590 and 1596 while more than 49 different artists worked on the illustrations. The first volume details the history of Akbar's family back to Timur, and the second volume describes Akbar's own reign as far as 1602. The third volume of the* Akbarnama, *the* Ain-i-Akbari, *or the "Institutes of Akbar," is the most famous. As well as containing a detailed report of Akbar's system of government and administration, the fourth book of this volume gives a more general history of India in addition to an account of Hindu philosophy, literature, religion, and custom.*

In the second volume of the Akbarnama, *Abu'l Fazl describes the third siege and consequent third Jauhar [Johar] at the fort of Chittor [Chaitúr] in 1567. Jauhar and Saka, often referred to together simply as Jauhar, are the names for the two parts of a mass suicide ritual carried out by the Rájpút clans in the face of immediate and inescapable military defeat. Jauhar specifically refers to the self-immolation of the women and children in anticipation of capture and abuse. Saka is the subsequent or simultaneous march of the men to certain death at the hands of their enemies. Not an immediate witness of the Jauhar, Abu'l Fazl reports that several fires became visible in Chittor less than an hour after the governor of the fort was killed. He describes the women as unwilling participants in the Jauhar, victims of the Rájpút men, who, the next day, came out of the house of Ráná, the temple of Mahádeo, and the gate of Rámpúrah in "twos and threes" to "[throw] away" their own lives.*

Source

Abu'l Fazl Ibn Mubarak, "An Account of the Siege and Reduction of Chaitur by the Emperor Akbar," from the *Akbar-namah of Shaikh Abul-Fazl*, tr. Major David Price. *Miscellaneous Translations from Oriental Languages*, vol. II (London: Samuel Bentley, 1834, pp. 14–15, 31–34, 38, 40).

from BIOGRAPHY OF THE EMPEROR AKBAR: ON JAUHAR AND SAKA

In the meantime, entertaining a notion that the imperial army was but inadequately provided with the means of carrying on the arduous operations of a siege, the infatuated Ráná devoted his attention to strengthen the fortifications of Chaitúr, and to furnish it with stores and provisions for many years to come. And yet, to the limited scope of human vision, the ramparts of this celebrated place seemed already beyond the reach of anything like a successful attack. He lodged in it, moreover, a garrison of five thousand Rájpúts of acknowledged bravery, and already renowned for their devotion to the paths of glory. After which, having laid waste the surrounding districts in every direction, so that there was not left a blade of grass remaining, he finally withdrew himself beyond the inaccessible passes of his mountain lands.

On due consideration, Akbar was early convinced that the success of the enterprise in which he was engaged would be but little advanced by pursuing the man whose doom was already sealed, in the heart of his mountains; and it was surely by the inspiration of his superior fortune, that he now determined to devote the whole of his energies to the sole object of making himself master of this fortress of Chaitúr, universally considered as the very foundation and resting-place of the Ráná's power and renown. On Thursday, the 19th of the latter Rabía, accordingly, he appeared in the neighbourhood of the place, and encamped.

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A.H. 975. A.D. 1568, 23d February.—The circumstances of this auspicious and splendid event may be distinctly collected from the following statement. On the night previous to the day of its capture, the place was attacked at once on every side, and the rampart having been breached in

several parts, all things indicated that the conquest of Chaitúr was now at hand. Near the head of the principal sap, the imperial troops pushing forward on anticipation, succeeded in effecting a considerable breach in the strongest part of the wall, where they proceeded to exhibit the noblest proofs of devoted courage. Some time after midnight, however, the besieged brought a competent force to bear upon this breach; and on the one hand, giving themselves up to the winds of destiny, proceeded on the other to load this breach with bales of cloth and cotton, and faggots smeared with oil, for the purpose of setting on fire the moment the besiegers advanced to the assault, so that it would be impossible to effect a passage through.

At a period so critical, a person came in view of the emperor, clad in that species of armour denominated *Hazár míkhí*, or mail of a thousand studs, and exhibiting proofs of the highest authority, stood upon the breach, where he appeared to exert himself with signal bravery and activity. The identity of this personage who thus conspicuously distinguished himself could not however be made out by any one. Immediately seizing a favourite fusil, on which he had bestowed the name of Singrám, Akbar instantly discharged it at this person, expressing at the same time to Shujáat Khán and Rájáh Bahgwántdás, that feeling on this occasion the same exhilarating sensation as he experienced when killing game, he entertained but little doubt that his shot had taken effect on the man; on which Khán Jahán, another of the chiefs in attendance, took occasion to mention, that during the night the same personage had repeatedly appeared in the breach, exerting himself with singular diligence and activity, and that if he appeared no more, it was sufficiently evident that he must have fallen.

Not an hour afterwards, Jubbár Kulí Dívánah came and reported that not a man of the enemy was to be seen at the breach, and almost at the same instant the interior of the fort appeared on fire in several places. The attendants on the emperor were indulging in a variety of conjectures as to the meaning of this conflagration, when Rájah Bahgwántdás set the matter at rest by explaining that this was the Johar fire; adding, that in Hindustán, on the occurrence of a catastrophe such as was likely to happen on this memorable night, it was the custom to prepare a pile of sandalwood and odiferous drugs, together with dry fuel and other combustibles smothered with oil, and placing those in whom they could confide in charge of their women, with instructions to set fire to the pile and consume these unoffending and hapless females to ashes, the instant it was ascertained that the conflict had terminated fatally, and that the men were slain.

In fact, on the morning which dawned in victory to the imperial arms, it was ascertained that the shot discharged by the royal Akbar had actually taken effect on the person of Jaimal Pátá, the governor of the fort, and at once decided the fate of Chaitúr and his own. The Johar conflagration was found to ascend from the mansions of Pátá of the Seisúdíah tribe, and one of the Ráná's most confidential ministers, of the Rahtúrs, of whom a certain Sáhib was the chief, and of Aisúrdas the leader of the Cháhúns, in which there were consumed to the number altogether of three hundred helpless females.

During the remainder of the night, although the breach had been entirely abandoned by the garrison, which had fled in dismay on the death of Jaimul, and withdrawn to various recesses of the places, the imperial troops, nevertheless, cautiously abstained from attack, with that prudent forbearance always necessary to avert unseen and sudden danger. They were at the same time held in perfect readiness to enter the place at the first dawn of daylight. Accordingly, at break of day, the troops issued at once from their trenches, and rushing into the fort at all points, proceeded immediately to the work of bondage and slaughter; while the unfortunate Rájpúts, having lost all order, were put to the sword, fighting and resisting to the very last man.

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The number of Rájpúts inured to war collected on this occasion for the defence of Chaitúr, is stated at nearly eight thousand; but the inhabitants, who bore a part also in the defence of the place, amounted to more than forty thousand men. When the banners of the empire were displayed upon the works, the besieged retired partly into the pagodas; and trusting to the sanctity of those places, and the protection of their idols, awaited with fortitude the moment to lay down their lives. Others obstinately awaited their fate in their own houses; while others, with sword in hand and shortened lance, bravely faced their assailants, from whom they found the death they sought. Those who had madly taken post in the temples and dwelling-houses, when they beheld the imperial troops advancing upon them, fiercely sallied out, but were destroyed before they could come within sword-length, by the fire of their adversaries.

Thus, between early dawn and the hour of noon was the period in which these unfortunates were doomed to perish—to be consumed both body and soul by the wrath of Omnipotence; the slain on this occasion being stated at nearly thirty thousand men.

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On this memorable day, although there was not in the place a house or street or passage of any kind that did not exhibit heaps of slaughtered bodies, there were three points in particular at which the number of the slain was surprisingly great; one of these was the palace of the Ráná, into which the Rájpúts had thrown themselves in considerable numbers; from whence they successively sallied upon the imperialists in small parties, of two and three together, until the whole had nobly perished sword in hand. The other was the temple of Mahádeo, their principal place of worship, where another considerable body of the besieged gave themselves up to the sword. Thirdly, was the gate of Rámpúrah, where these devoted men gave their bodies to the winds in appalling numbers.

This important conquest, which may well be considered the crowning triumph of imperial fortune, had the immediate effect of dispelling those fumes of ambition and self-importance which had distempered the brains of the haughtiest powers in Hindústán, and disposed them to assume in exchange the bonds of sincere allegiance.

JOHN DONNE (1572–1631)

from Biathanatos (expanded in Archive)

John Donne, the English metaphysical poet and, after 1621, Dean of St. Paul's, was a writer of sonnets, songs, elegies, satires, and sermons. It is for his poetic works, many with religious themes, that he is principally known today. Raised as a Roman Catholic in times of pervasive anti-Catholic sentiment, Donne was educated at home before attending Oxford and Cambridge; however, he did not take degrees there, probably because of the requirement of the Oath of Supremacy. In 1592, he pursued an education in law, but in 1596, joined a military expedition to Cádiz and later a treasure-hunting expedition in the Azores.

It is not known precisely when he abandoned Catholicism, but by 1597, he had conformed sufficiently with the Church of England to hold a government position, becoming secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper and a member of Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council. Donne served in Parliament and made friends and acquaintances in influential circles, but his excellent prospects collapsed early in 1602 when Donne—then 30 years old—revealed that he had secretly married Anne More, the 17-year-old niece and protegée of Egerton's wife. Donne was briefly imprisoned, though the legal validity of the marriage was upheld, and he endured a long period of unemployment following his release.

Donne wrote Biathanatos, *an extended essay on suicide, in 1608. A letter to his friend Henry Goodyer in the same year is often cited as evidence of his troubled mood during this period:*

> Every Tuesday I make account that I turn a great hourglass, and consider what a week's life is run out since I writ. But if I ask myself what I have done in the last watch, or would do in the next, I can say nothing. If I say that I have passed it without hurting any, so may the spider in my window. . . . I have often suspected myself to be overtaken . . . with a desire of the next life, which, though I know it is not merely out of a weariness of this . . . [I suspect] worldly encumbrances have increased. . . .

One school of interpretation sees Biathanatos *as an epiphenomenon of Donne's morbid condition, though Donne's argument in the work would not excuse a suicide from personal distress. Other commentators see in it an attempt by Donne to overcome temptation. But it is also a public work, though not actually published during Donne's lifetime, one that shares with his* Pseudo-Martyr *(written no more than a year later) partisan and controversial aims addressed to a broad audience.*

Biathanatos *is a long and extremely difficult work with a challenging and, Donne says, "paradoxical" thesis. It undertakes an exhaustive analysis of both secular and religious argumentation against suicide, and argues that suicide is "not so naturally sin, that it may never be otherwise." Most cases of suicide, including those committed from despair, self-protection, self-aggrandizement, fear of suffering, impatience to reach the afterlife, or other self-interested motives are indeed sinful. But, Donne argues, suicide is justified when, like submission to martyrdom, it is done* with charity, *done for the glory of God. Indeed, in Donne's highly unconventional view, Christ himself, in not merely allowing himself to be crucified but in voluntarily emitting his last breath on the cross, was in fact a suicide. This is the model by which men ought to be willing to lay down their lives for their brethren. However, Donne argues elsewhere in* Biathanatos, *because suicide is so likely to be committed for self-interested reasons rather than wholly for the glory of God, it is appropriate for both civil and canon law to prohibit it.*

Donne recognized that his unconventional thesis was "misinterpretable," and it is probably for this reason that he did not allow Biathanatos *to be published. He directed his friend Robert Ker, to whom he gave a copy, to "keep it . . . with . . . jealousy. . . . Publish it not, but yet burn it not." While Donne's* Biathanatos *was the first full-length book devoted to the topic of suicide written in the Western tradition, John Sym's* Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing *(1637) [q.v.] was the first to be published; Donne's work was not published until a decade later, in 1647, after his death and against his wishes, by his son.*

Source

John Donne, *Biathanatos*, A Modern-Spelling Edition, Part III, Distinction iv, sections 1–11, lines 4692–4992, eds. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982,

pp. 166–176; available online at http://web.archive.org/web/20111117203143/http://www.philosophy.utah.edu/onlinepublications/PDFs/Biathanatos_CompleteText.pdf. Quotation in introduction, pp. xi-xii.

from BIATHANATOS

. . . We shall nowhere find a better portrait of charity than that which St. Augustine hath drawn: "She loves not that which should not be loved, she neglects not that which should be loved, she bestows not more love upon that which deserves less, nor doth she equally love more and less worthiness, nor upon equal worthiness bestow more and less love." To this charity, the same blessed and happy father proportions this growth: Inchoated, increased, grown great, and perfected, and this last is, saith he, when in respect of it we contemn this life. And yet he acknowledgeth a higher charity than this; for, Peter Lombard allowing charity this growth, beginning, proficient, perfect, more and most perfect, he cites St. Augustine, who calls that perfect charity to be ready to die for one another. But when he comes to that than which none can be greater, he says then, the Apostle came to *cupio dissolvi*. For as one may love God with all his heart, and yet he may grow in that love, and love God more with all his heart, for the first was commanded in the Law, and yet counsel of perfection was given to him who said that he had fulfilled the first commandment, so, as St. Augustine found a degree above that charity which made a man *paratum ponere*, which is *cupere*, so there is a degree above that, which is to do it.

This is that virtue by which martyrdom, which is not such of itself, becomes an act of highest perfection. And this is that virtue which assureth any suffering which proceeds from it to be infallibly accompanied with the grace of God. Upon assuredness, therefore, and testimony of a rectified conscience that we have a charitable purpose, let us consider how far we may adventure upon authority of Scripture in this matter which we have in hand.

First, therefore, by the frame and working of St. Paul's argument to the Corinthians, "though I give my body that I be burned, and have not love, it profiteth nothing," these two things appear evidently; first, that in a general notion and common reputation, it was esteemed a high degree of perfection to die so, and therefore not against the law of nature; and secondly, by this exception, *without charity*, it appears that with charity it might well and profitably be done.

That which I observed . . . to arise from this argument was that, with charity, such a death might be acceptable. . . . Of which, as there may be such necessity, for confirming of weaker Christians, that a man may be bound to do it, as in this case is very probable, so there may be cases, in men very exemplary, and in the cunning and subtle carriage of the persecutor, as one can no other way give his body for testimony of God's truth, to which he may then be bound, but by doing it himself.

As, therefore, naturally and customarily, men thought it good to die so, and that such a death, with charity, was acceptable, so is it generally said by Christ that "the good shepherd doth give his life for his sheep," which is a justifying and approbation of our inclination thereunto, for to say "the good do it" is to say "they which do it are good." And as we are all sheep of one fold, so in many cases we are all shepherds of one another, and owe one another this duty of giving

our temporal lives for another's spiritual advantage, yea, for his temporal. For that I may abstain from purging myself when another's crime is imputed to me is grounded upon such another text as this, where it is said the greatest love is to bestow his life for his friends; in which, and all of this kind, we must remember that we are commanded to do it so as Christ did it, and how Christ gave His body we shall have another place to consider.

Hereupon, because St. Peter's zeal was so forward, and carried him so high that he would die for the Shepherd, for so he says, "I will lay down my life for Thy sake," and this, as all expositors say, was merely and purely out of natural affection, without examination of his own strength to perform it, but presently and roundly, nature carried him to that promise. And, upon a more deliberate and orderly resolution, St. Paul witnesseth of himself such a willingness to die for his brethren: "I will be gladly bestowed for your souls."

A Christian nature rests not in knowing thus much, that we may do it, that charity makes it good, that the good do it, and that we must always promise, that is, incline, to do it and do something towards it, but will have the perfect fullness of doing it in the resolution and doctrine and example of our blessed Savior, who says *de facto*, "I lay down my life for my sheep. . . ."

To express the abundant and overflowing charity of our Savior all words are defective, for if we could express all which He did, that came not near to that which He would do if need were. It is observed by one . . . that Christ, going to Emmaus, spake of His passion so slightly, as though He had in three days forgot all that He had suffered for us, and that Christ, in an apparition to St. Charles, says that He would be content to die again, if need were; yea, to St. Bridget He said that for any one soul He would suffer as much in every limb as He had suffered for all the world in His whole body. And this is noted for an extreme high degree of charity, out of Anselm, that His blessed Mother said, rather than He should not have been crucified, she would have done it with her own hands, and certainly His charity was not inferior to hers: He did as much as any could be willing to do.

And therefore, as Himself said, "No man can take away my soul," and "I have power to lay it down." So without doubt, no man did take it away, nor was there any other than His own will the cause of His dying at that time. . . .

This actual emission of His soul, which is death, and which was His own act, and before His natural time (which His best beloved apostle could imitate, who also died when he would and went into his grave, and there gave up the ghost and buried himself, which is reported but of very few others, and by no very credible authors), we find thus celebrated: that that is a brave death which is accepted unconstrained, and that it is an heroic act of fortitude if a man, when an urgent occasion is presented, expose himself to a certain and assured death, as He did; and it is there said that Christ did so as Saul did, who thought it foul and dishonorable to die by the hand of an enemy; and that Apollonia, and others who prevented the fury of executioners and cast themselves into the fire, did therein imitate this act of our Savior, of giving up His soul before he was constrained to do it. So that, if the act of our blessed Savior, in whom there was no more required for death but that He should will that His soul should go out, were the same as Saul's and these martyrs' actual furtherance, which could not die without that, then we are taught that all those places of giving up our bodies to death, and of laying down the soul, signify more than a yielding to death when it comes.

And to my understanding there is a further degree of alacrity and propenseness to such a death, expressed in that phrase of John, "he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto

life eternal," and in that of Luke, "except he hate his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Such a loathness to live is that which is spoken of in the Hebrews: "some were racked and would not be delivered, that they might receive a better resurrection." This place Calvin interprets of a readiness to die, and expresses it elegantly: to carry our life in our hands, offering it to God for a sacrifice. And this the Jesuits in their rule extend thus far, let everyone think that this was said directly to him: Hate thy life. And they who in the other place accept this phrase "No man hateth his own flesh" to yield an argument against self-homicide in any case, must also allow that the same hate being commanded here authorizes that act in some case. And St. Augustine, apprehending the strength of this place, denies that by the authority of it the Donatists can justify their self-homicide when they list to die; but yet in those cases which are exempt from his rules, this place may encourage a man not to neglect the honor of God only upon this reason, that nobody else will take his life.

And therefore, the Holy Ghost proceeds more directly in the first Epistle of St. John, and shows us a necessary duty: Because He laid down His life for us, therefore we ought to lay down our lives for our brethren. All these places work us to a true understanding of charity, and to a contempt of this life in respect of it. And, as these inform us how ready we must be, so all those places which direct us by the example of Christ to do it as He did, show that in cases when our lives must be given, we need not ever attend extrinsic force of others. But, as He did in perfect charity, so we, in such degrees of it as this life and our nature are capable of, must die by our own will, rather than His glory be neglected, whensoever, as Paul saith, Christ may be magnified in our bodies, or the spiritual good of such another as we are bound to advance doth importune it.

. . . As Paulinus says to Amandus, thou mayst be bold in thy prayers to God for me to say, "Forgive him or blot out me," for thou canst not be blotted out; *iusum delere non potest iustitia*. And thus, retaining ever in our minds that our example is Christ, and that He died not constrained, it shall suffice to have learned by these places that, in charity, men may die so, and have done, and ought to do.

ROBERT BURTON (1577–1640)

from *Anatomy of Melancholy* (expanded in Archive)

Born in Lindley, Leicestershire, Robert Burton was an English clergyman and author. He was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, where he received bachelor of arts, master of arts, and bachelor of divinity degrees. Working as a tutor and librarian, he was elected a fellow in 1599. From 1616 until his death, he served as vicar nearby at St. Thomas's Church, living a self-described "silent, sedentary, solitary" lifestyle. His first published work was the Latin comedy Philosophaster *(1605).*

Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy *was originally published in 1621 under the pseudonym Democritus Junior. Burton apparently saw himself as completing the project of Democritus to discover*

the biological seat of melancholy, including what would now be called depression and related mental illnesses. It is reported that Burton also tried to recreate Democritus's practice of walking down to the haven at Abdera and laughing heartily at the ridiculous objects that presented themselves to his view, by repairing to the bridge-foot at Oxford and listening to the bargemen swearing at one another, "at which he would set his hands to his sides and laugh most profusely."

Anatomy of Melancholy *is a treatise on the symptoms, causes, and cures of the melancholic or depressive personality. The result of most of his life's work,* Anatomy *is encyclopedic in its references to nearly every aspect of 17th-century culture and thought, causing Lord Byron to remark that studying it was the surest way of obtaining "a reputation of being well read." Focusing particularly on previous theories of cognition but sprinkling the book with classical allusions in a style influenced by Montaigne and the satire of Erasmus, Burton treated the subject of depression in a manner ahead of his time and with a modification of the then-conventional mind/body dualism. The* Anatomy *was widely read and influenced several later writers, notably John Milton, Samuel Johnson, Laurence Sterne, and Charles Lamb.*

In the section "Prognostics of Melancholy," Burton treats suicide as the outcome of melancholy, though he also reviews classical and medieval arguments concerning the ethics of suicide. He thus appears to adopt potentially conflicting views: on the one hand, that suicide is the causal consequence of mental illness (and so not under voluntary control), and, on the other, that suicide is a matter of moral choice (which one can make badly). Similar ambivalence about suicide in mental illness persists into contemporary times. In any case, Burton argues that one ought not to be rash in censuring those who commit suicide. Only God alone can tell the reasons for their act and what shall become of their souls, he insists, since they may have repented and been forgiven at the very moment of death, as he famously puts it, "betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat."

Sources

Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part 1, Section 4, Member 1, available from Project Gutenberg at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10800/10800-h/10800-h.htm. Originally published in 1638. This edition, by Karl Hagen, is based on a 19th-century edition that modernized Burton's spelling and typographic conventions, and has been further corrected. Latin deleted in print text. Quotation in biographical sketch from A. H. Bullen, introduction to Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Rev. A. R. Shilleto, vol. 1, London: George Bell and Sons, 1893, p. xii.

from ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY

PROGNOSTICS OF MELANCHOLY

Seldom this malady [melancholy] procures death, except (which is the greatest, most grievous calamity, and the misery of all miseries,) they make away themselves, which is a frequent thing, and familiar amongst them. . . . The doom of all physicians. . . .

And so far forth death's terror doth affright,
He makes away himself, and hates the light

To make an end of fear and grief of heart,
He voluntary dies to ease his smart.

In such sort doth the torture and extremity of his misery torment him, that he can take no pleasure in his life, but is in a manner enforced to offer violence unto himself, to be freed from his present insufferable pains. So some (saith Fracastorius) "in fury, but most in despair, sorrow, fear, and out of the anguish and vexation of their souls, offer violence to themselves: for their life is unhappy and miserable. They can take no rest in the night, nor sleep, or if they do slumber, fearful dreams astonish them." In the daytime they are affrighted still by some terrible object, and torn in pieces with suspicion, fear, sorrow, discontents, cares, shame, anguish, &c. as so many wild horses, that they cannot be quiet an hour, a minute of time, but even against their wills they are intent, and still thinking of it, they cannot forget it, it grinds their souls day and night, they are perpetually tormented, a burden to themselves, as Job was, they can neither eat, drink or sleep. Psal. cvii. 18. "Their soul abhorreth all meat, and they are brought to death's door, being bound in misery and iron:" they curse their stars with Job, "and day of their birth, and wish for death:" for as Pineda and most interpreters hold, Job was even melancholy to despair, and almost madness itself; they murmur many times against the world, friends, allies, all mankind, even against God himself in the bitterness of their passion,. . . live they will not, die they cannot. And in the midst of these squalid, ugly, and such irksome days, they seek at last, finding no comfort, no remedy in this wretched life, to be eased of all by death.. . . . [A]ll creatures seek the best, and for their good as they hope . . . in show at least . . . to be freed as they wish. Though many times, as Aesop's fishes, they leap from the frying-pan into the fire itself, yet they hope to be eased by this means: and therefore (saith Felix Platerus) "after many tedious days at last, either by drowning, hanging, or some such fearful end," they precipitate or make away themselves: "many lamentable examples are daily seen amongst us:". . . (as Seneca notes), . . . "one hangs himself before his own door,—another throws himself from the house-top, to avoid his master's anger,—a third, to escape expulsion, plunges a dagger into his heart,"—so many causes there are—His. . . furor his—love, grief, anger, madness, and shame, &c. 'Tis a common calamity, a fatal end to this disease, they are condemned to a violent death, by a jury of physicians, furiously disposed, carried headlong by their tyrannising wills, enforced by miseries, and there remains no more to such persons, if that heavenly Physician, by his assisting grace and mercy alone do not prevent, (for no human persuasion or art can help) but to be their own butchers, and execute themselves. Socrates his cicuta, Lucretia's dagger, Timon's halter, are yet to be had; Cato's knife, and Nero's sword are left behind them, as so many fatal engines, bequeathed to posterity, and will be used to the world's end, by such distressed souls: so intolerable, insufferable, grievous, and violent is their pain, so unspeakable and continuate. One day of grief is an hundred years, as Cardan observes: . . . as well saith Areteus, a plague of the soul, the cramp and convulsion of the soul, an epitome of hell; and if there be a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy man's heart.

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Another doubt is made by some philosophers, whether it be lawful for a man in such extremity of pain and grief, to make away himself: and how these men that so do are to be censured. The Platonists approve of it, that it is lawful in such cases, and upon a necessity; Plotinus . . . and Socrates himself defends it, in Plato's Phaedon, "if any man labour

of an incurable disease, he may despatch himself, if it be to his good." Epicurus and his followers, the cynics and stoics in general affirm it, Epictetus and Seneca amongst the rest, any way is allowable that leads to liberty, "let us give God thanks, that no man is compelled to live against his will;" . . . death is always ready and at hand. [D]ost thou see that steep place, that river, that pit, that tree, there's liberty at hand,. . . as that Laconian lad cast himself headlong . . . to be freed of his misery: every vein in thy body, if these be . . ., will set thee free,. . . there's no necessity for a man to live in misery. . . . Wherefore hath our mother the earth brought out poisons, saith Pliny, in so great a quantity, but that men in distress might make away themselves? which kings of old had ever in a readiness,. . . Livy writes, and executioners always at hand. Speusippes being sick was met by Diogenes, and carried on his slaves' shoulders, he made his moan to the philosopher; but I pity thee not, quoth Diogenes,. . . thou mayst be freed when thou wilt, meaning by death. Seneca therefore commends Cato, Dido, and Lucretia, for their generous courage in so doing, and others that voluntarily die, to avoid a greater mischief, to free themselves from misery, to save their honour, or vindicate their good name, as Cleopatra did, as Sophonisba, Syphax's wife did, Hannibal did, as Junius Brutus, as Vibius Virus, and those Campanian senators in Livy . . . to escape the Roman tyranny, that poisoned themselves. Themistocles drank bull's blood, rather than he would fight against his country, and Demosthenes chose rather to drink poison, . . . Censorius and Plancus, those heroical Romans to make away themselves, than to fall into their enemies' hands. How many myriads besides in all ages might I remember,. . . Rhasis in the Maccabees is magnified for it, Samson's death approved. So did Saul and Jonas sin, and many worthy men and women,. . . in Ecclesia, saith Leminchus, for killing themselves to save their chastity and honour, when Rome was taken, as Austin [Augustin] instances, Jerome vindicateth the same in *Ionam* and Ambrose, commendeth Pelagia for so doing. Eusebius admires a Roman matron for the same fact to save herself from the lust of Maxentius the Tyrant. Adelhelmus, abbot of Malmesbury, calls them *Beatas virgines*. . . Titus Pomponius Atticus, that wise, discreet, renowned Roman senator, Tully's dear friend, when he had been long sick, as he supposed, of an incurable disease . . ., was resolved voluntarily by famine to despatch himself to be rid of his pain; and when as Agrippa, and the rest of his weeping friends earnestly besought him, . . . not to offer violence to himself, "with a settled resolution he desired again they would approve of his good intent, and not seek to dehort him from it:" and so constantly died. . . . Even so did Corellius Rufus, another grave senator, by the relation of Plinius Secundus, famish himself to death; . . . neither he nor Hispilla his wife could divert him, but . . . die he would, and die he did. So did Lycurgus, Aristotle, Zeno, Chrysippus, Empedocles, with myriads, &c. In wars for a man to run rashly upon imminent danger, and present death, is accounted valour and magnanimity, to be the cause of his own, and many a thousand's ruin besides, to commit wilful murder in a manner, of himself and others, is a glorious thing, and he shall be crowned for it. The Massegatae in former times, Barbiccians, and I know not what nations besides, did stifle their old men, after seventy years, to free them from those grievances incident to that age. So did the inhabitants of the island of Choa, because their air was pure and good, and the people generally long lived, . . . with poppy or hemlock they prevented death. Sir Thomas More in his Utopia commends voluntary death, if he be *sibi aut aliis molestus*, troublesome to himself or

others ("especially if to live be a torment to him) let him free himself with his own hands from this tedious life, as from a prison, or suffer himself to be freed by others." And 'tis the same tenet which Laertius relates of Zeno, of old,. . . and which Plato . . . approves, if old age, poverty, ignominy, &c. oppress, and which Fabius expresseth in effect. . . . It is an ordinary thing in China, (saith Mat. Riccius the Jesuit) "if they be in despair of better fortunes, or tired and tortured with misery, to bereave themselves of life, and many times, to spite their enemies the more, to hang at their door." Tacitus the historian, Plutarch the philosopher, much approve a voluntary departure, and Aust . . . defends a violent death, so that it be undertaken in a good cause,. . . no man so voluntarily dies, but *volens nolens*, he must die at last, and our life is subject to innumerable casualties, who knows when they may happen,. . . rather suffer one, than fear all. "Death is better than a bitter life," Eccl. 30:17. and a harder choice to live in fear, than by once dying, to be freed from all. Theombrotus Ambraciotes persuaded I know not how many hundreds of his auditors, by a luculent oration he made of the miseries of this, and happiness of that other life, to precipitate themselves. And having read Plato's divine tract *de anima*, for example's sake led the way first. That neat epigram of Callimachus will tell you as much. . . .

Calenus and his Indians hated of old to die a natural death: the Circumcellians and Donatists, loathing life, compelled others to make them away, with many such: but these are false and pagan positions, profane stoical paradoxes, wicked examples, it boots not what heathen philosophers determine in this kind, they are impious, abominable, and upon a wrong ground. "No evil is to be done that good may come of it;" *reclamat Christus, reclamat Scriptura*, God, and all good men are against it: He that stabs another, can kill his body; but he that stabs himself, kills his own soul. . . . he that gives a beggar an alms (as that comical poet said) doth ill, because he doth but prolong his miseries. But Lactantius calls it a detestable opinion, and fully confutes it, and S. Austin, . . . so doth Hierom to Marcella of Blesilla's death, *Non recipio tales animas*, &c., he calls such men *martyres stultae Philosophiae*: so doth Cyprian *de duplici martyrio*;. . . 'tis mere madness so to do,. . . To this effect writes Aristotle . . . but it needs no confutation. This only let me add, that in some cases, those hard censures of such as offer violence to their own persons, or in some desperate fit to others, which sometimes they do, by stabbing, slashing, &c. are to be mitigated, as in such as are mad, beside themselves for the time, or found to have been long melancholy, and that in extremity, they know not what they do, deprived of reason, judgment, all, as a ship that is void of a pilot, must needs impinge upon the next rock or sands, and suffer shipwreck. P. Forestus hath a story of two melancholy brethren, that made away themselves, and for so foul a fact, were accordingly censured to be infamously buried, as in such cases they use: to terrify others, as it did the Milesian virgins of old; but upon farther examination of their misery and madness, the censure was revoked, and they were solemnly interred, as Saul was by David, and Seneca well adviseth,. . . be justly offended with him as he was a murderer, but pity him now as a dead man. Thus of their goods and bodies we can dispose; but what shall become of their souls, God alone can tell; his mercy may come *inter pontem et fontem, inter gladium et jugulum*, betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat . . . : Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case, it may be thine: . . . We ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures, as some are; charity will judge and hope the best: God be merciful unto us all.

JOHN SYM (1581c.–1638)

from *Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing* (expanded in Archive)

John Sym, a zealous Calvinist minister born in Scotland and bred under its predestinarian theology, became rector of Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, England, where he remained until his death. He was much respected by his parishioners, though eventually hated by the government during its anti-Puritan periods. His treatise Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing *(1637) was the first full-length work on suicide published in English; although John Donne had written* Biathanatos *[q.v.] nearly three decades earlier (1608), Donne's work was not published until 1647, a decade after that of Sym.*

Sym's treatise is representative of the increasingly severe attitudes toward suicide developing from the 1530s and '40s to the time at which Sym was writing, a century later. Suicide was a felony at law, punished with increasing harshness beginning with the Tudors and Stuarts by forfeiture of property, burial restrictions, and body desecration, and with little mercy for suicide victims who were insane: non compos mentis *verdicts were returned in less than two percent of suicide cases tried between the accession of Henry Tudor and the Restoration. There were other voices in the early 17th century: Montaigne's* A Custom of the Isle of Cea *[q.v] had been translated into English in 1603, and the plays of Shakespeare [q.v.] had given some currency to Stoic and Epicurean ideas of suicide. Nevertheless, law, religion, and folk belief in England during this period remained adamantly opposed to suicide.*

Sym was convinced that there was an epidemic of suicide in England at the time he was writing, and indeed the number of reported suicides had increased dramatically. His principal aim in Lifes Preservative *is to show that deliberate self-destruction (including the very broad range of behavior he includes under this notion) is a heinous sin. In its full and direct form, suicide is a sin greater than murder—that is, self-destruction is a greater sin than the destruction of another person.*

Sym's conceptual analysis of self-killing distinguishes between direct and indirect self-murder, between self-murder by commission and by omission, and between spiritual and bodily self-murder. Thus, suicide as he understands it includes not only direct self-killing but parasuicidal behavior and risk-taking; it includes under the notion of suicidal behavior many forms of self-exposure and self-neglect: idolatry, perjury, self-starvation, lack of moderation in food or drink, unwarranted use of medicines or surgery, exposing oneself to lethal dangers due to inordinate desire for money and possessions, irrational risk-taking by soldiers on the battlefield or sailors at sea, dueling, keeping society with dangerous people, and breaking laws that have capital punishments. While Sym's concept of suicide is extremely broad, he was actually prepared to be more tolerant in practice than many of his contemporaries, and he believed that it was possible to overcome suicidal despair. As one commentator writes, Sym's work is "marbled with paradoxes."

Source

John Sym, *Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing*, ed. Michael MacDonald. London and New York: Routledge, 1988 (facsimile of the original, 1637, spelling and punctuation modernized), from Chapter 7, 10, 11, pp. 53–57, 84–88, 90–95, 109–111; quotation in the introductory biography, p. xliv.

from LIFES PRESERVATIVE AGAINST SELF-KILLING

OF MURDER, AS IT IS OF ONE'S SELF

Of the specific difference of self-murder

Besides the consideration of murder, in a man's killing of himself, the third point in the general description of self-murder is the efficient cause, or means of it, and that is a man's own self, by his own procurement, who is also the immediate object of that vile fact, whereof now I am to speak.

Here is now the specific difference of this sort of murder, whereby it transcends and is distinguished from all other murders, and consists in restraint of the act of killing, in regard of its individual object, to a man's own life and self, which is the greatest and cruellest act of hostility in the world. When a man, who by nature is most bound to preserve himself, reflects upon himself to destroy himself, the horribleness whereof is so monstrous that we read no Law made against it, as if it were a thing not to be supposed possible. And this sin, of all others, is most against the Law of Nature, for that self-preservation arms a man to turn upon others unlawfully invading him to kill him. And also, it is against that self-love, which is the rule of our love to others and therefore what we may not lawfully, in this case, do to others, we can less lawfully do it to ourselves against this general law of love; in breaking whereof, specially towards ourselves, we violate the whole law, the general sum whereof is love.

Of the evil and greatness of self-murder.

This is the malice of Satan, and our own wretchedness, to set us at division and enmity against our selves, and in a monstrous manner to make a man both the active and passive subject of his own action, and utter destruction of himself, the greatest mischief that can betide him in this world, and so a man's self becomes his own executioner, by his own hands or means, principal or accessary, by command, or otherwise.

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Diverse observations from the general consideration of self-murder.

From the consideration of self-murder we may observe: first, that man stands in more danger of destruction than any other creature. For, no creature is subject to attempts against the life of it, by itself, but only man, who is environed also with mortal dangers from without, but specially of his own procurement, by opening the way for others to invade and hurt him, by breaches and arms of his own making.

Secondly, we here see that God wants not means of execution of his judgements upon man. Seeing, he can leave a man to fall upon himself and be his own executioner.

The use hereof is to make us afraid to offend God, or to provoke him to be our enemy, or to live unreconciled with him, destitute of the assurance of his peace and favor.

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Of the kinds of bodily self-murder.

Direct and indirect self-murder defined.

The kinds of bodily self-murder are two: Direct and Indirect. Self -murder is not such a general, as in the schools is called *Genus univocum*, so predicated of them both, as equally communicating itself to both those species, or species under it. . . .

Direct bodily self-murder is the killing of a man's body or natural life by himself, or his own means, advisedly, wittingly, and willingly, intending and effecting his own death.

Indirect self-murder of the body is when a man advisedly, wittingly, and willingly intends, and does that which he knows may be of itself, the means of the destruction of his natural life, although he does not purposely intend to kill himself thereby. Or it is the killing of a man's own body, by unlawful, either moral or natural means of his own using, without intending of his death thereby.

How indirect self-murder is greater, in some respects, than direct.

It is demanded, whether direct, or indirect self-murder be the greater sin? I answer, if we consider the freeness of the will, with less enforcement, and with more delight, prosecuting those deadly courses of indirect self-murder, there can be, in that respect, less said to excuse it than for direct self-murder. An indirect self-murderer is last (in respect of the mortal means he uses, and persists in, until the effect be accomplished,) as sure of death, which he abhors, as a direct self-murderer is of the same, that he desires, and endeavors for, and longs after.

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How absolutely direct self-murder is the greatest.

Notwithstanding, Direct self-murder is the far more grievous sin, in three respects.

First, in respect of the direct intention of the will, and of its immediate object of murder of a man's self, whereby it partakes, more properly and fully, of the nature of self-murder, than indirect self-murder does. . . .

Secondly, for the consequences of the acts of them both, direct self-murder brings more certain and sudden inevitable destruction than indirect, which in this latter may be better prevented, by having time of repentance, than it can be in the former. And death in this is an accidental effect, besides the intention of the agent and nature of the means, which in the former is per se, and of the nature of the action so purposely ordered to that end.

Thirdly, direct self-murder hath more and greater sins complicated in it, than indirect hath, both by extension, in kinds and number against God, others, and ourselves, and also for intention, in degrees, by reason of circumstances of the party doing the same, against the light and reluctancy of nature, with direct intention to kill himself.

THOMAS HOBBES (1588–1679)

from *Leviathan*
from *A Dialogue of the Common Laws of England*

The British empiricist Thomas Hobbes was born in Westport, Wiltshire, and, after being abandoned by his father, was raised by an affluent uncle. A precocious child, by the age of 14 he was translating a Greek tragedy into Latin verse. He attended Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and graduated in 1608. He tutored the future earls of Devonshire; this life-long contact with the family offered him exposure to influential people and the opportunity to travel. In 1628, Hobbes published his translation of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian Wars, *partly as a call to his countrymen to see the dangers of democracy. He was influenced by Euclid's geometry while writing his first philosophical work,* A Short Tract on First Principles, *in which he employed the deductive method, in contrast to the popular inductive method of Francis Bacon and other experimental scientists. Knowledge of contemporary scientific thought and analysis pushed him away from the apparent vagaries of Aristotelianism and toward a new materialistic philosophy. Hobbes used geometry and the developing Galilean science of motion to describe man in society and his senses and imagination.*

In 1640, because of his controversial views on the need for undivided sovereignty as expressed in his Elements of Law, Natural and Politic, *Hobbes was forced for safety's sake into exile in Paris, where he met Réné Descartes. Among his many activities there was service as a tutor to the Prince of Wales. Hobbes wrote on a great many topics, contributing to the fields of metaphysics and logic and laying the incipient foundations for Utilitarianism. In 1651, Hobbes published his masterpiece,* Leviathan; or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil. *In 1666, the House of Commons investigated* Leviathan *for atheism and blasphemy, with the only result that Hobbes, having the king's favor, was restricted in what he could publish in England. His materialistic philosophy and the concept of a social contract as the basis of society made him one of the most controversial English philosophers of his day. Hobbes lived to be 91; his later years were characterized by intellectual vigor and continuing controversy.*

In Leviathan, *Hobbes develops an egoistic psychology of man, describing the natural human condition as "a war of every man against every man." Because men are by nature aggressive and violent, reason shows that it is prudent for them to enter into a social contract, giving absolute power to a sovereign who can guarantee to protect them from each other. This enables man to transcend the pre-societal condition of life that Hobbes famously describes as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," and thus gives rise to a peaceful societal life in which social institutions and joint undertakings are possible. In the selection from* Leviathan *presented here, Hobbes outlines the tension between self-preservation and self-destruction. Although he does not explicitly mention suicide, he explains how the social contract involves the exchange of one's rights over one's own (and others') life for the right of security.*

In a brief passage in A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England, *Hobbes exposes a conundrum in the legal treatment of the person who is* felo de se. *In this dialogue, probably written between 1662 and the middle to late 1670s but not published until 1681, two years after the author's death, Hobbes is exploring the tension between his own views that the "state of nature" (though the phrase does not occur in the* Dialogue*) is one of self-interested mutual hostility, tempered in the civil condition by the investment of sovereignty in the monarch, and the views of Sir Edward Coke, a noted defender of the authority of common law lawyers. Hobbes's role in this dialogue—he speaks as the Philosopher—is to point out conceptual difficulties in the common law. Both under common law and under English statute, he points out, suicide is treated as a serious crime, but one of which it must be assumed, he argues on the basis of his egoistic psychology, that the perpetrator is not guilty by reason of insanity.*

Sources

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, J. C. A. Gaskin, ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), part I, ch. XIV: Of the First and Second Natural Laws, and of Contracts, pp. 86–89; Thomas Hobbes, *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, Joseph Cropsey, ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), "Of Crimes Capital," pp. 116–117.

from LEVIATHAN

OF THE FIRST AND SECOND NATURAL LAWS, AND OF CONTRACTS

The RIGHT OF NATURE, which writers commonly call *jus naturale*, is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing any thing, which in his own judgment, and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.

By LIBERTY, is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments: which impediments, may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would; but cannot hinder him from using the power left him, according as his judgment, and reason shall dictate to him.

A LAW OF NATURE, (*lex naturalis*,) is a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit, that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved. For though they that speak of this subject, use to confound *jus*, and *lex*, *right* and *law*; yet they ought to be distinguished; because RIGHT, consisteth in liberty to do, or to forbear: whereas LAW, determineth, and bindeth to one of them: so that law, and right, differ as much, as obligation, and liberty; which in one and the same matter are inconsistent.

And because the condition of man, (as hath been declared in the precedent chapter) is a condition of war of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own

reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it follweth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, (how strong or wise so ever he be,) of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason, *that every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war*. The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is, *to seek peace, and follow it*. The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, *by all means we can, to defend ourselves*.

From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavour peace, is derived this second law; *that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself*. For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he; then there is no reason for any one, to divest himself of his: for that were to expose himself to prey, (which no man is bound to) rather than to dispose himself to peace. This is that law of the Gospel; *whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them*. And that law of all men, *quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris* [do not do to others what you would not wish to be done to you].

To *lay down* a man's *right* to any thing, is to *divest* himself of the *liberty*, of hindering another of the benefit of his own right to the same. For he that renounceth, or passeth away his right, giveth not to any other man a right which he had not before; because there is nothing to which every man had not right by nature: but only standeth out of his way, that he may enjoy his own original right, without hindrance from him; not without hindrance from another. So that the effect which redoundeth to one man, by another man's defect of right, is but so much diminution of impediments to the use of his own right original.

Right is laid aside, either by simply renouncing it; or by transferring it to another. By *simply* RENOUNCING; when he cares not to whom the benefit thereof redoundeth. By TRANSFERING; when he intendeth the benefit thereof to some certain person, or persons. And when a man hath in either manner abandoned, or granted away his right; then he is said to be OBLIGED, or BOUND, not to hinder those, to whom such right is granted, or abandoned, from the benefit of it: and that he *ought*, and it is his DUTY, not to make void that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is INJUSTICE, and INJURY, as being *sine jure*; the right being before renounced, or transferred. So that *injury*, or *injustice*, in the controversies of the world, is somewhat like to that, which in the disputations of scholars is called *absurdity*. For as it is there called an absurdity, to contradict what one maintained in the beginning: so in the world, it is called injustice, and injury, voluntarily to undo that, which from the beginning he had voluntarily done. The way by which a man either simply renounceth, or transferreth his right, is a declaration, or signification, by some voluntary and sufficient sign, or signs, that he doth so renounce, or transfer; or hath so renounced, or transferred the same, to him that accepteth it. And these signs are either words only, or actions only; or (as it happeneth most often) both words and actions. And the same are the BONDS, by which men are bound, and obliged: bonds, that have their strength, not from their own nature, (for nothing is more easily broken than a man's word,) but from fear of some evil consequence upon the rupture.

Whensoever a man transferreth his right, or renounceth it; it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself; or for some other good he hopeth for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *good to himself*. And therefore there be some rights, which no man can be understood by any words, or other signs, to have abandoned, or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them, that assault him by force, to take away his life; because he cannot be understood to aim thereby, at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment; both because there is no benefit consequent to such patience; as there is to the patience of suffering another to be wounded, or imprisoned: as also because a man cannot tell, when he seeth men proceed against him by violence, whether they intend his death or not. And lastly the motive, and end for which this renouncing, and transferring of right is introduced, is nothing else but the security of a man's person, in his life, and in the means of so preserving life, as not to be weary of it. And therefore if a man by words, or other signs, seem to despoil himself of the end, for which those signs were intended; he is not to be understood as if he meant it, or that it was his will; but that he was ignorant of how such words and actions were to be interpreted.

from A DIALOGUE OF THE COMMON LAWS OF ENGLAND

A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England:

Of Crimes Capital

Lawyer. He is a Felon also that killeth himself voluntarily, and is called, not only by Common Lawyers, but also in divers Statute-Laws, *Felo de se*.

Philosopher. And 'tis well so: For names imposed by Statutes are equivalent to Definitions; but I conceive not how any Man can bear *Animum felleum*, or so much Malice towards himself, as to hurt himself voluntarily, much less to kill himself; for naturally, and necessarily the Intention of every Man aimeth at somewhat, which is good to himself, and tendeth to his preservation: And therefore, methinks, if he kill himself, it is to be presumed that he is not *compos mentis*, but by some inward Torment or Apprehension of somewhat worse than Death, Distracted.

Lawyer. Nay, unless he be *compos mentis* he is not *Felo de se* (as Sir *Edw. Coke* saith), and therefore he cannot be Judged a *Felo de se*, unless it be first proved he was *compos mentis*.

Philosopher. How can that be proved of a Man dead; especially if it cannot be proved by any Witness, that a little before his death he spake as other Men used to do. This is a hard place; and before you take it for Common-Law it had need to be clear'd.

BARUCH SPINOZA (1632–1677)

from *Ethics*

Baruch Spinoza was a Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish descent, from a family that settled in Amsterdam to avoid religious persecution in Portugal. When Spinoza was six, his mother died; by the time he was in his early 20s, a sister and his father had also died. In his education, Spinoza studied Biblical and Talmudic texts and eventually mastered Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and German. Because of his questioning of traditional Jewish beliefs, in 1656, he was charged with atheism and was ostracized from his congregation, upon which he Christianized his name to Benedict. Four years later, Spinoza began work on the first book of his masterpiece, the Ethics, *which was completed in 1675. During this time, Spinoza supported himself as a lens grinder, and it was glass dust, along with consumption, that killed him in 1677.*

Along with Descartes and Leibniz, Spinoza was one of the most influential rationalists of the 17th century. In Ethics, *he used a deductive method, much like Euclid's, which inferred subsequent propositions from what he thought was a self-evident foundation of knowledge. The notations Definition, Demonstration, Scholia, Proposition, Corollary, and* Q.E.D. (quod erat demonstrandum, *or "that which was to be shown") in the selection printed here are references to elements of this deductive system; the internal references in the text are to other sections of the work. Spinoza's system begins with God as the foundation of all reality and develops into a monist metaphysics in which God, substance, and nature are all interchangeable entities. To understand the nature of reality, man must go beyond sensual and scientific knowledge to an intuition of reality. Spinoza's moral philosophy stressed that by coming to have true knowledge and love of God, man could know and experience freedom from the constraints of his own passions.*

Spinoza believed that death was a severance of body and mind that does not necessarily involve physical death. Because his criteria of personal identity include memory, amnesia may count as death as much as becoming a corpse. For Spinoza, immortality is impersonal and the cause of death is external; therefore, suicide is an illogical act. Reason demands that every person should love himself, should desire what leads him to greater perfection, and should endeavor to preserve his own life; this seeking after self-preservation is the principal basis of virtue. As Spinoza says in his famous dictum, "A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life."

Source

Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV: Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions, Prop. XVIII-XXII. Tr. R. H. M. Elwes, 1883. Available online from Project Gutenberg, text release #3800 at www.gutenberg.org.

from ETHICS

PROP. XVIII. Desire arising from pleasure is, other conditions being equal, stronger than desire arising from pain.

Proof. Desire is the essence of a man (Def. of the Emotions, i.), that is, the endeavour whereby a man endeavours to persist in his own being. Wherefore desire arising from pleasure is, by the fact of pleasure being felt, increased or helped; on the contrary, desire arising from pain is, by the fact of pain being felt, diminished or hindered; hence the force of desire arising from pleasure must be defined by human power together with the power of an external cause, whereas desire arising from pain must be defined by human power only. Thus the former is the stronger of the two. *Q.E.D.*

Note. In these few remarks I have explained the causes of human infirmity and inconstancy, and shown why men do not abide by the precepts of reason. It now remains for me to show what course is marked out for us by reason, which of the emotions are in harmony with the rules of human reason, and which of them are contrary thereto. But, before I begin to prove my Propositions in detailed geometrical fashion, it is advisable to sketch them briefly in advance, so that everyone may more readily grasp my meaning.

As reason makes no demands contrary to nature, it demands, that every man should love himself, should seek that which is useful to him—I mean, that which is really useful to him, should desire everything which really brings man to greater perfection, and should, each for himself, endeavour as far as he can to preserve his own being. This is as necessarily true, as that a whole is greater than its part. (Cf. III. iv.)

Again, as virtue is nothing else but action in accordance with the laws of one's own nature (IV. Def. viii.), and as no one endeavours to preserve his own being, except in accordance with the laws of his own nature, it follows, first, that the foundation of virtue is the endeavour to preserve one's own being, and that happiness consists in man's power of preserving his own being; secondly, that virtue is to be desired for its own sake, and that there is nothing more excellent or more useful to us, for the sake of which we should desire it; thirdly and lastly, that suicides are weak-minded, and are overcome by external causes repugnant to their nature. Further, it follows from Postulate iv., Part II., that we can never arrive at doing without all external things for the preservation of our being or living, so as to have no relations with things which are outside ourselves. Again, if we consider our mind, we see that our intellect would be more imperfect, if mind were alone, and could understand nothing besides itself. There are, then, many things outside ourselves, which are useful to us, and are, therefore, to be desired. Of such none can be discerned more excellent, than those which are in entire agreement with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are united, they form a combination twice as powerful as either of them singly.

Therefore, to man there is nothing more useful than man—nothing, I repeat, more excellent for preserving their being can be wished for by men, than that all should so in all points agree, that the minds and bodies of all should form, as it were, one single mind and one single body, and that all should, with one consent, as far as they are able, endeavour to preserve their being, and all with one consent seek what is useful to them all. Hence, men who are governed by reason—that is, who seek what is useful to them in accordance with reason, desire for themselves nothing,

which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and, consequently, are just, faithful, and honourable in their conduct.

Such are the dictates of reason, which I purposed thus briefly to indicate, before beginning to prove them in greater detail. I have taken this course, in order, if possible, to gain the attention of those who believe, that the principle that every man is bound to seek what is useful for himself is the foundation of impiety, rather than of piety and virtue.

Therefore, after briefly showing that the contrary is the case, I go on to prove it by the same method, as that whereby I have hitherto proceeded.

PROP. XIX. Every man, by the laws of his nature, necessarily desires or shrinks from that which he deems to be good or bad.

Proof. The knowledge of good and evil is (IV. viii.) the emotion of pleasure or pain, in so far as we are conscious thereof; therefore, every man necessarily desires what he thinks good, and shrinks from what he thinks bad. Now this appetite is nothing else but man's nature or essence (Cf. the Definition of Appetite, III. ix. note, and Def. of the Emotions, i.). Therefore, every man, solely by the laws of his nature, desires the one, and shrinks from the other, &c. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XX. The more every man endeavours, and is able to seek what is useful to him—in other words, to preserve his own being—the more is he endowed with virtue; on the contrary, in proportion as a man neglects to seek what is useful to him, that is, to preserve his own being, he is wanting in power.

Proof. Virtue is human power, which is defined solely by man's essence (IV. Def. viii.), that is, which is defined solely by the endeavour made by man to persist in his own being. Wherefore, the more a man endeavours, and is able to preserve his own being, the more is he endowed with virtue, and, consequently (III. iv. and vi.), in so far as a man neglects to preserve his own being, he is wanting in power. *Q.E.D.*

Note. No one, therefore, neglects seeking his own good, or preserving his own being, unless he be overcome by causes external and foreign to his nature. No one, I say, from the necessity of his own nature, or otherwise than under compulsion from external causes, shrinks from food, or kills himself: which latter may be done in a variety of ways. A man, for instance, kills himself under the compulsion of another man, who twists round his right hand, wherewith he happened to have taken up a sword, and forces him to turn the blade against his own heart; or, again, he may be compelled, like Seneca, by a tyrant's command, to open his own veins—that is, to escape a greater evil by incurring, a lesser; or, lastly, latent external causes may so disorder his imagination, and so affect his body, that it may assume a nature contrary to its former one, and whereof the idea cannot exist in the mind (III. x.). But that a man, from the necessity of his own nature, should endeavour to become non-existent, is as impossible as that something should be made out of nothing, as everyone will see for himself, after a little reflection.

PROP. XXI. No one can desire to be blessed, to act rightly, and to live rightly, without at the same time wishing to be, act, and to live—in other words, to actually exist.

Proof. The proof of this proposition, or rather the proposition itself, is self-evident, and is also plain from the definition of desire. For the desire of living, acting, &c., blessedly or rightly, is (Def. of the Emotions, i.) the essence of man—that is (III. vii.), the endeavour made by everyone to preserve his own being. Therefore, no one can desire, &c. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XXII. No virtue can be conceived as prior to this endeavour to preserve one's own being.

Proof. The effort for self-preservation is the essence of a thing (III. vii.); therefore, if any virtue could be conceived as prior thereto, the essence of a thing would have to be conceived as prior to itself, which is obviously absurd. Therefore no virtue, &c. *Q.E.D.*

Corollary. The effort for self-preservation is the first and only foundation of virtue. For prior to this principle nothing can be conceived, and without it no virtue can be conceived.

SAMUEL VON PUFENDORF (1632–1694)

from *Of the Law of Nature and Nations* (expanded in Archive)

Samuel von Pufendorf was born into a long line of Lutheran clergy in Saxony. He studied at the universities of Leipzig and Jena, shifting from early studies in theology to philosophy, philology, history, and law. While he was working as a tutor for the Swedish ambassador in Copenhagen, Denmark, war broke out between the two countries; Pufendorf was subsequently arrested and spent eight months in prison. During this time, he began his first book on the principles of law.

Seven years later, at the request of the king of Sweden, Pufendorf took up a full professorship at the University of Lund. It was here that Pufendorf published his major work, Of the Law of Nature and Nations *(1672). By examining national and international law, Pufendorf argued that every individual, by virtue of his or her innate human dignity, had a right to freedom and equality. In believing that self-interest is the source of action in society, he viewed slavery as unnatural and unreasonable. Pufendorf was influenced by Thomas Hobbes, who also placed emphasis on "nature" as a basis for ethical relationships. Unlike Hobbes, however, Pufendorf assumed that the state of nature is peaceful, not hostile. Pufendorf held the secular view that natural law and ethical principles stem from human reason, and that law and ethics should concern man in his social context.*

In the section entitled "On the Duties of Man Towards Himself in the Cultivation of His Mind as Well as in the Care of His Body and of His Life," Pufendorf addresses the specific matters of "whether there be any obligation to preserve one's life" and "whether suicide be lawful" by analyzing the works of previous philosophers, many of whose views he rejects. In this discussion, which provides evidence of his voluminous scholarship, he appears to answer secular arguments with religious ones, arguing that suicide is an injury to God and to the human race, and insists that the law of nature requires self-preservation. He considers situations in which one person takes risks to save the life of another, or where a disgraceful death may be avoided, or where a person lets himself be killed by another, but denies "the absolute power of a man over his own life."

In 1677, Pufendorf abandoned his writings on law and went to Stockholm where he became the royal historiographer, writing a 33-volume history of Sweden. In 1688, he moved to Berlin where he

continued to write histories. Pufendorf's works were standards for students of history and law, but fell into obscurity after the 18th century.

Source

Samuel von Pufendorf [Puffendorf], *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, tr. Basil Kennett, 3rd ed. Printed for R. Sare, R. Bonwicke, T. Goodwyn, J. Walthoe, M. Wotton, S. Manschip, R. Wilkin, B. Tooke, R. Smith, T. Ward, and W. Churchill, London 1717. Book II, Ch. 4, sections 16–19: "The Duties of Man with Regard to Himself," pp. 177–182. Spelling modernized; internal citations, footnotes and Greek passages deleted.

from OF THE LAW OF NATURE AND NATIONS

On the Duties of Man Towards Himself in the Cultivation of his Mind as Well as in the Care of his Body and of his Life

How passionately every man loves his own life, and how heartily he studies the security and preservation of it, is evident beyond dispute. But it will admit of a debate whether the bare natural instinct which he enjoys in common with beasts, inclines him to these desires; or whether he is not engaged in them by some superior command of the law of nature. For, in as much as no one can, in a legal sense, stand *obliged* to himself, such a law seems to be of no force or significance which is terminated in my self, which I can dispense with when I please, and by the breach of which I do no one an injury. . . . But since by the universal consent of all wise men it is acknowledged, that the Almighty Creator made man to serve him, and to set forth his glory in a more illustrious manner, by improving the good things committed to his trust; and since *Society*, for which a man is sent into the world, cannot be well exercised and maintained, unless every one, as much as in him lies, takes care of his own preservation . . . it manifestly appears, that a man by throwing aside all care of his own life, though he cannot properly be said to *injure* himself, yet is highly injurious both to Almighty God, and to the general body of mankind.

. . . 'Tis a question of more difficulty, whether at all, or how far a man hath power over his own life, either to expose it to extreme danger, or to consume it by slow means and degrees or lastly, to end it in sudden and violent manner. Many of the Ancients allowed a man an absolute right in these points, and thought he might either voluntarily offer his life as a pledge for another's, or *devote* it freely, without any such design of preserving the life of his friend; or whenever he grew weary of living, might prevent the tardiness of nature and fate. Pliny calls the ability to kill one's self, *the most excellent* convenience, *in the midst of so many torments of life*. Whom we can by no means excuse from flat impiety, for daring to think so abjectly of the greatest gift of Heaven. It is our business to examine what seems most agreeable in this case, to the *law of nature*. And here we may take it first of all to be true beyond dispute, that since men both can and ought to apply their pains to the help and service of another; and since some

certain kinds of labour, and an overstraining earnestness in any, may so affect the strength and vigour of a man, as to make old age and death come on much sooner, than if he had passed his days in softness, and in easy pursuits; any one may, without fault, voluntarily contract his life in some degree, upon account of obliging mankind more signally, by some extraordinary services and benefits. . . .

Farther, in as much as it frequently happens, that the lives of many men cannot be preserved, unless others expose themselves, on their behalf, to a probable danger of losing their own; this makes it evident, that the lawful governour may lay an injunction on any man in such cases, not to decline the danger upon pain of the severest punishment. . . .

Nor doth it seem at all repugnant either to *natural reason*, or to the *Holy Scriptures*, (which command us to *lay down our lives for our brethren*) that, without any such rigid injunction of a superior, a man should voluntarily expose himself to a probability of losing his life for others; provided he hath good hopes of thus procuring their safety, and that they are worthy of so dear a ransom. . . . But that those vain customs of men's devoting themselves out of foolhardiness and ostentation (such as we observed to be in use amongst the Japanese), are contrary to the *law of nature*, we do not in the least doubt. For there can be no virtue in an action where there's no reason. Nor do we pretend to maintain, that the *law of nature* obliges a man to prefer the lives of others to his own; especially supposing the cases and circumstances to be equal. For besides that the common inclination of mankind is an argument to the contrary, we might allege the testimony of witnesses beyond all exception, allowing a man to be always *dearest to himself*, and *charity* still to *begin at home*.

It remains that we examine, whether or no a man, at his own free pleasure, either when he grows weary of life, or on the account of avoiding some terrible impending evil, or some ignominious and certain death, may hasten his own fate, as a remedy to his present or to his future misfortunes. . . .

. . . [T]hus much we take to be evident, that those who voluntarily put an end to their own lives, either as tired out with the many troubles which commonly attend our mortal condition; or from an *abhorrence* of indignities and evils, which yet would not render them disgraceful members of *human society*; or through fear of such pains and torments as by resolutely enduring, they might have become useful examples to others; cannot be well cleared of the charge of *sinning against the law of nature*. . . .

But those are, on all accounts, to be exempted from the crime of self-murder, who lay violent hands on themselves, under any disease robbing them of the use of reason. Many persons likewise who have run into voluntary destruction, upon an exceeding fright and consternation, have on that account been excused by moderate and candid judges.

It ought to be observed farther on this head, that it makes no difference whether a man kill himself, or force others to dispatch him. For he who at such a time, or on such occasion, ought not to die, is by no means excused, if he makes use of another man's hands to procure his death; since what a man doth by another, he is supposed in law to have done himself, and must therefore bear the guilt or *imputation* of the fact. . . .

To conclude, since we deny that a man hath absolute power over his own life, it is plain that we cannot approve of those laws, which in some countries either command or permit people to make themselves away. . . .

JOHN LOCKE (1632–1704)

from *The Second Treatise of Government*

Of the State of Nature
Of Slavery

John Locke was born in Wrington, Somersetshire, in 1632 and was raised by his father, an attorney in Pensford. Because of frail health, his early education was completed at home, but he later attended Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. In 1658, he was elected to teach philosophy and Greek, but he found the subjects uninteresting and soon switched his focus to medicine. Locke was made a fellow of the Royal Society after his work in natural and experimental science with scientists such as Robert Boyle. Locke became the physician to Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, whose friendship influenced him to enter politics. When Shaftesbury fell from the king's favor in 1675, Locke moved to France for four years, where he met philosophers who helped to shape his epistemological theories. Shaftesbury fled to Holland after James II became king, where he died; a few months later, Locke also fled to Holland, suspected of complicity in the Rye House Plot. Locke remained in the Netherlands until 1688; during this time, he produced many of his most important writings. He returned to England after the revolution of 1688, when William of Orange became king, and served for 11 years as commissioner of trade and plantations. Locke's last years were spent with friends at the Masham estate in Essex, where he was the intellectual leader of the Whigs and instituted many governmental reforms; he died there in 1704. Locke's intellectual influence was far-reaching: he laid the epistemological foundations for modern science, influenced the Declaration of Independence and other foundational documents for the new United States, and contributed to the start of the empiricist tradition and the Age of Enlightenment and Reason in England and France.

During a discussion with friends about ethics and religion, Locke proposed to try to determine what questions human understanding could and could not address. The first drafts of his attempts date as early as 1671; the result—some 17 years later—was called the Essay Concerning Human Understanding *(1689), a general theory of knowledge and language. Knowledge, Locke argues, is formed out of the accumulation of everyday sensations—this is a central tenet of empiricism; "innate" knowledge is inconceivable.*

In the Two Treatises of Government *(1689), Locke outlines the principles of politics. He rejects the idea of the divine right of kings and introduces the concept of a social contract: it is the consent of the people that is the basis of the right to rule. While for Locke, claims to self-ownership ground property rights in the labor of one's body, self-ownership is nevertheless limited. As is clear in the passage presented here, God is the ultimate owner of one's body:*

> For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure.

This central argument is supplemented by another descended from Plato [q.v], that one ought "not to quit his station willfully," that is, one ought not desert the post to which God has appointed him. On both grounds, one is not free to end one's own life, and one is not free to place oneself in a position where another may take it.

Although in the section "On Slavery" Locke reiterates his view that a man does not have "the power of his own life," that is, the moral authority to take his own life, he does note that a man convicted of a capital crime—who by his act has forfeited his own life, and whose sentence is delayed by being forced into penal servitude—is able to hasten his death sentence after all by refusing to obey his master. The slave can thus "draw on himself the death he desires," that is, bring about the ending of his life by provoking others into executing him. Is this a moral argument, perhaps one that, in asserting the claim that in exploiting a convict for slave labor the master "does him no injury," also implies that because the condemned man's life is already forfeit, he (unlike other persons) is therefore no longer under an obligation to preserve it? Or is it simply an observation about the practical possibilities for a slave to avoid a life of intolerable hardship? The question of whether this passage is neutral as to the morality of hastening one's own death sentence remains open to discussion.

Source

John Locke, "The Second Treatise of Government," Ch. 2, sections 4, 6; Ch. 4, sections 22–23, from *Two Treatises of Government*, second edition, ed. Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960, pp. 287–289, 301–302 [original text only; apparatus not used; spelling and punctuation modernized]. Available from Project Gutenberg Release #7370 at http://www.gutenberg.org/.

from THE SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT

Of the State of Nature

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions, and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another: there being nothing more evident, than that the creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all, should by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty. . . .

But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use

than its bare preservation calls for it. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure. And being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours. Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

Of Slavery

The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule. The liberty of man, in society, is to be under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the commonwealth; nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what that legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it. Freedom then is not what Sir Robert Filmer tells us, Observations, A. 55., a liberty for every one to do what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to be tied by any laws; but freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it; a liberty to follow my own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man: as freedom of nature is to be under no other restraint but the law of nature.

This freedom from absolute, arbitrary power, is so necessary to, and closely joined with a man's preservation, that he cannot part with it, but by what forfeits his preservation and life together. For a man, not having the power of his own life, cannot, by compact, or his own consent, enslave himself to any one, nor put himself under the absolute, arbitrary power of another, to take away his life, when he pleases. No body can give more power than he has himself; and he that cannot take away his own life, cannot give another power over it. Indeed, having, by his fault, forfeited his own life, by some act that deserves death; he, to whom he has forfeited it, may (when he has him in his power) delay to take it, and make use of him to his own service, and he does him no injury by it: for, whenever he finds the hardship of his slavery outweigh the value of his life, 'tis in his power, by resisting the will of his master, to draw on himself the death he desires.

SAMUEL PEPYS (1633–1703)

from *Diary*

Samuel Pepys was born in London of humble origin, but through his skill, motivation, and patronage became an important man of his time. A series of government positions, most of them in the Navy department, eventually culminated in appointment to the secretaryship of the Admiralty and his first term in Parliament in 1673. He renewed the English Navy, controlling the largest spending budget of the state, and eventually doubled the strength of the Navy's force. Pepys's personal standards of efficiency, industry, and confidence established a distinguished administrative tradition, but they also bought him several enemies. In 1679, Pepys spent some months in the Tower of London after being falsely accused of treason by Lord Shaftesbury. He was elected president of the Royal Society in 1684 and moved in circles that included such thinkers as Isaac Newton, Christopher Wren, and John Dryden, as well as nearly all the great scholars of the period. After his retirement in 1689, he worked on his Memories of the Royal Navy *(1690).*

Pepys is most known for his Diary *(not published until 1825), composed during the decade of the 1660s. In the* Diary, *he describes Reformation England with great art and explicitness, both revealing small details of his daily life and exploring large perspectives of the time. Historical events, such as the Great Plague of 1665, the Great Fire of 1666, the Dutch War, and accounts of famous people, such as Charles II, are woven into a rich and detailed narrative. Pepys wrote extensively in his* Diary *until 1669, when his eyesight failed him and his wife Elizabeth died. Pepys's entire library, with its books arranged by size, remains intact—with neither additions nor deletions permitted—at Magdalene College, Cambridge.*

This selection from the Diary *for January 21, 1668, and following days is Pepys's account of the suicide attempt of his cousin Kate Joyce's husband, a tavern-keeper, and his own attempt to protect the estate from forfeiture to the Crown, as the law required in cases of suicide. Pepys's observations are significant for their account of the effects of England's forfeiture laws on a suicide's family.*

Source

Diary of Samuel Pepys, 1668. Transcribed from the Shorthand Manuscript In The Pepysian Library Magdalene College Cambridge By The Rev. Mynors Bright. Project Gutenberg Release #4195 at www.gutenberg.org. Entries for January 21, 22, 24, 1668.

from DIARY: JANUARY 21ST, 22ND, AND 24TH, 1668

21st. Up, and while at the office comes news from Kate Joyce that if I would see her husband alive, I must come presently. So, after the office was up, I to him, and W. Hewer with me, and find him in his sick bed (I never was at their house, this Inne, before) very sensible in discourse and thankful for my kindness to him, and his breath rattled in his throate, and

they did lay pigeons to his feet while I was in the house, and all despair of him, and with good reason. But the story is that it seems on Thursday last he went sober and quiet out of doors in the morning to Islington, and behind one of the inns, the White Lion, did fling himself into a pond, was spied by a poor woman and got out by some people binding up hay in a barn there, and set on his head and got to life, and known by a woman coming that way; and so his wife and friends sent for. He confessed his doing the thing, being led by the Devil; and do declare his reason to be, his trouble that he found in having forgot to serve God as he ought, since he come to this new employment: and I believe that, and the sense of his great loss by the fire, did bring him to it, and so everybody concludes. He stayed there all that night, and come home by coach next morning, and there grew sick, and worse and worse to this day. I stayed awhile among the friends that were there, and they being now in fear that the goods and estate would be seized on, though he lived all this while, because of his endeavouring to drown himself, my cozen did endeavour to remove what she could of plate out of the house, and desired me to take my flagons; which I was glad of, and did take them away with me in great fear all the way of being seized; though there was no reason for it, he not being dead, but yet so fearful I was. So home, and there eat my dinner, and busy all the afternoon, and troubled at this business. In the evening with Sir D. Gawden, to Guild Hall, to advise with the Towne-Clerke about the practice of the City and nation in this case: and he thinks that it cannot be found self-murder; but if it be, it will fall, all the estate, to the King. So we parted, and I to my cozens again; where I no sooner come but news was brought down from his chamber that he was departed. So, at their entreaty, I presently took coach to White Hall, and there find Sir W. Coventry; and he carried me to the King, the Duke of York being with him, and there told my story which I had told him: and the King, without more ado, granted that, if it was found, the estate should be to the widow and children. I presently to each Secretary's office, and there left caveats, and so away back again to my cozens, leaving a chimney on fire at White Hall, in the King's closet; but no danger. And so, when I come thither, I find her all in sorrow, but she and the rest mightily pleased with my doing this for them; and, indeed, it was a very great courtesy, for people are looking out for the estate, and the coroner will be sent to, and a jury called to examine his death. This being well done to my and their great joy, I home, and there to my office, and so to supper and to bed.

22nd. Up, mightily busy all the morning at the office . . . after dinner to my cozen Kate's, and there find the Crowner's jury sitting, but they could not end it, but put off the business to Shrove Tuesday next, and so do give way to the burying of him, and that is all; but they all incline to find it a natural death, though there are mighty busy people to have it go otherwise, thinking to get his estate, but are mistaken. Thence, after sitting with her and company a while, comforting her: though I can find she can, as all other women, cry, and yet talk of other things all in a breath. . . .

24th. . . . I to St. Andrew's church, in Holburne, at the 'Quest House, where the company meets to the burial of my cozen Joyce; and here I staid with a very great rabble of four or five hundred people of mean condition, and I staid in the room with the kindred till ready to go to church, where there is to be a sermon of Dr. Stillingfleete, and thence they carried him to St. Sepulchre's. But it being late, and, indeed, not having a black cloak to lead her [Kate Joyce] with, or follow the corps, I away, and saw, indeed, a very great press of people follow the corps. . . .

HUANG LIUHONG (1633–c. 1710)

from *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence*

Huang Liuhong (Huang Liu-hung) was a district magistrate during the early Qing (Ch'ing) or Manchu dynasty (1644–1912), when Manchu values and behavior were being imposed on Han China. He was born in Xinchang (Hsin-ch'ang) at a time of civil conflict and great disorder. When he was 19 years old, Huang passed a civil service exam and earned the juren (chü-jen) *degree. He was then able to travel throughout China, educating himself on the history of the provinces he visited. At the time, the ruling Manchu, after decades of violence and political strife, sought the cooperation of educated citizens in an attempt to assuage nationalist opposition. It was in these circumstances that, in 1670, Huang was made magistrate of the Tancheng (T'an-ch'eng) district. He also served as magistrate in other districts and learned enough from his experiences to write a book of guidelines for the office of magistrate. This book,* A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence*, became a manual for local governors in the Qing dynasty for several centuries.*

In this manual, Huang describes types of suicide that were common at the time and distinguishes among the different sorts of intentions under which a person might commit suicide. Suicides committed because of suffering or abuse are to be pitied, he asserts, while those committed for other reasons, like a trivial grudge or to injure an enemy, cannot be condoned. Huang then explains methods he used in his district to lower the number of suicides being committed. This window into the practice of suicide, as well as attitudes about self-killing in 17th century China, gives some evidence of the Chinese assumption that others may play a causal role in suicides and provides a look at one official's efforts—apparently effective—at suicide prevention.

Source

Huang Liu-Hung, *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence: A Manual for Local Magistrates in Seventeenth-Century China*, ed. and tr. Djang Chu. Topic 7, Administration of Justice: Chüan 14, Homicide (Part I); Chüan 15, Homicide (Part II). Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1984, pp. 319–320, 355–358.

from A COMPLETE BOOK CONCERNING HAPPINESS AND BENEVOLENCE

Homicide

Homicide cases are of two kinds: genuine and counterfeit. Among the genuine homicide cases there are seven different categories: killing in a robbery (*jie sha*), killing by premeditation

(*mou sha*), killing by intent (*gu sha*), killing in an affray (*dou sha*), killing by error (*wu sha*), killing in play (*xi sha*), and killing by accident (*guo shi sha*). Counterfeit homicide cases involve people who hang themselves, drown themselves, or cut their own throats—those who are mistakenly considered as homicide victims but in reality are suicides.

Among the seven categories of homicide cases—aside from killing in a robbery—only the criminals who are convicted of killing by premeditation, killing by intent, or killing in an affray are subject to the death penalty. In each of these cases, however, the victim's corpse must be examined to ascertain that there are death-causing wounds and the murder weapon inspected to see if the weapon tallies with the wounds. A murderer forfeits his life only when genuine homicide is proved. In the absence of an examination of the corpse and an inspection of the weapon, even if it is a genuine homicide case, the suspect's life cannot be taken away arbitrarily without proof of guilt. This provision of the law is designed to prevent false accusations and to protect the life of the innocent.

Suicides who hang themselves or kill themselves by other means are generally prompted by temporary emotional outbursts or by the intention of harming their enemies. In such cases the victims take their own lives without serious consideration, and their deaths cannot be attributed to the intentions of their enemies. However, there are instances in which the victim commits suicide as a result of oppression and browbeating by his enemy. Such cases must be investigated thoroughly. On the other hand, there are also cases in which a person dies after a long illness and his relatives bring the corpse to the door of his enemy to make a false accusation of homicide with the intention of blackmailing him. This kind of false accusation must be severely punished to suppress the evil tendency of making false charges.

The ways to differentiate the seven categories of homicide and the essentials of conducting examinations of corpses are explained below for the reference of magistrates who wish to be cautious in making decisions in order to prevent injustice and to protect the lives of innocent people.

Suicide

Suicide happens to both men and women. Among women who commit suicide, some kill themselves because of ill treatment at the hands of their parents-in-law, while others do so because of their husband's cruelties. These unfortunate women deserve our sympathy. However, there are cases in which a woman, having a quarrel with her mother-in-law, having an occasional argument with her husband, or having exchanges of heated words with a sister-in-law or even a stranger, kills herself in a paroxysm of distress. This kind of self-destruction does not constitute a case for condolence. Often a girl commits suicide because of maltreatment by her stepmother or shame brought on her by an illicit liaison.

As to men who commit suicide, some suicides are due to dire poverty or suffering from extreme cold and hunger; others are the victims of private or official debts without means to repay. These people are entitled to our compassionate consideration. But there are those who sacrifice their lives because of insignificant grudges and choose to die in the homes of their enemies, their main purpose being to vent their spleen and let their relatives seize the enemies' property on trumped-up charges. Such acts of depravity cannot be condoned.

When a suicide case is reported, the magistrate should go to the place where it happened and examine the corpse immediately. When real grievances of the deceased can be ascertained, the person who has caused his death should be punished with heavy blows and levied a fine to

pay for the burial expenses and to pacify the spirit of the deceased. On the other hand, if the suicide is committed without provocation or valid reason, the magistrate should order the relatives to have the corpse buried and no innocent people should be implicated in the case. Thus the evil trend of false accusation can be suppressed and the people will know how important it is to value their own lives.

When I was the magistrate of Tancheng and later Dongguang, there were many suicide cases, especially in Tancheng. As the land was unproductive, the people lived in abject poverty, with few pleasures in life. Furthermore, the social trend was toward militancy and ruthlessness; the inhabitants habitually enjoyed fighting one another and paid little attention to the maxims of etiquette and courtesy. Not infrequently father and son living in the same household turned into enemies on the spur of the moment, and relatives and neighbors in the same village got into fist fights while entertaining and feasting. Suicides by hanging were daily occurrences and self-destruction by cutting one's own throat or drowning in the river were common events.

I became alarmed at the situation and said to myself, "The lack of education on the part of youthful delinquents is the fault of their parents. Not heeding the instruction of their parents is the mistake of the youth themselves. If I teach them first and punish them later in accordance with the provisions of the law, they cannot complain about the severity of judgments." Accordingly, I issued a proclamation that was written in the form of popular doggerel rhymes and ordered copies posted in all villages and city wards. In doing so I hoped the ignorant females would understand the importance of practicing filial piety and kindness as well as the shame of being vixens and shrews; and that people in all walks of life—merchants, peasants and artisans—would be proud to be law-abiding citizens and would recognize it as disgraceful to be belligerent and quarrelsome. The main purpose, however, was to eliminate the causes for committing suicide as well as to admonish potential suicides of the legal consequences of taking such futile action.

I said in essence, "Those males who hang themselves from rafters or drown themselves in water will become wandering ghosts, hovering under the roofs or drifting with the waves. If the officials fail to bury their bodies, they will be infested with and consumed by flies and maggots. Who is there to have pity on them? Those females who hang themselves with rope or sashes will become specters haunting narrow alleys and dark rooms. When an inquest is ordered their naked bodies will be exposed to prying eyes. Did they not possess a sense of shame when they were living? The human body is not only a bequest of one's parents but also a result of countless cycles of reincarnation. That anyone can be degraded enough to destroy it with his own hands and regard it no more important than that of a pig or a dog is something I detest most vigorously. Why should I value the body bequeathed to someone by his parents if he does not value it himself? Why should I refrain from treating it as if it were that of a pig or a dog if he himself treats it that way? From now on, anyone who uses a case of suicide to falsely accuse another of a crime shall be subject to the punishment the alleged crime would have merited. Anyone who gathers a mob to rob others on the pretext of avenging a suicide shall be punished according to the law on robbery in broad daylight. Would not this make the one who commits suicide with such a vile scheme in mind sacrifice his life in vain? This magistrate always backs up his words with deeds! Ye multitudes, reflect on this and realize what is at stake!"

During my tenures of magistracy I strictly ordered all village headmen and local elders to report suicide cases with accurate descriptions and to designate them as such. Whenever a case was reported, I would ride to the locale immediately to examine the corpse. If it was a genuine

suicide case without any suspicious implications, I would investigate the cause of the suicide; those who were involved were punished with blows or fined for burial expenses. If the suicide was committed without adequate reason and did not deserve sympathy, the relatives of the deceased were ordered to bury the corpse and to sign a statement acknowledging that it was a suicide.

On such occasions I would not issue warrants for arrests and would not bring a large number of runners to the examination. No matter how far away the place was, I would bring my own ration and would not oblige the family of the deceased to furnish even a cup of tea. I would order the clerk of the criminal section to record the appearance of the corpse and take down the testimonies of relatives. No mat shed would be installed for this purpose. All I needed was a stool and a mat to sit on. Not a single cash would be spent by the family of the deceased, and they would not be required to appear at the yamen. The case would be concluded in a day, not even postponed overnight.

If there were unruly people gathering a group of followers, armed with cudgels and weapons, to create disturbances, they would immediately be arrested and punished. The ringleaders would be brought back to the yamen and put in the cangue, then led back to the locality, under the supervision of the village elders, for public exposure.

After I had implemented this policy for half a year, the inhabitants of the district began to get my message and the number of suicide cases decreased dramatically. After one year no more cases were reported. Many unnecessary deaths were avoided and I was spared many unpleasant trips. Who can say that public education and law enforcement do not produce the desired effect in an isolated district?

NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS CULTURES (documented 1635–1970)

Selections extended in the Digital Archive or that appear in their entirety in the Archive may be accessed through this single QR code.

NORTHEAST

Ojibwa

#1. *Mrs. Cochran Becoming a* Windigo
(R. Landes, 1932–35)

Micmac

#2. *The Gaspesians: Suicide, Shame, and Despair.*
(Chrestien Le Clercq, 1675–86)

Huron

#3. *Le Jeune's Relation*
(Jean de Brébeuf; Father Paul le Jeune, 1635–36)

#4. *The Suicide of Children* (in Archive only)
(Anthony F. C. Wallace, citing LeMercier, 1600s)

Iroquois

#5. *Suicide*
(Father Joseph François Lafitau, 1712–17)
#6. *Suicide of the Widowed*
(Baron de Lahontan, 1703)
#7. *The Song of Death*
(Baron de Lahontan, 1703)

Seneca

#8. *Murder and Suicide* (in Archive only)
(Mrs. Mary Jemison, 1817)
#9. *The Code of Handsome Lake*
(Edward Cornplanter, Arthur C. Parker, 1850, 1913)
#10. *The Suicide as Earthbound*
(Jesse Cornplanter)

SOUTHEAST

Cherokee

#11. *Varieties of Shame: Time of Death, Pollution, and the Disfigurement of Smallpox*
(James Adair, 1775)

Natchez

#12. *The Favorite Wife of the Chief Sun*
(Jean-Bernard Bossu, 1751–62)

GREAT PLAINS

Comanche

#13. *Elderly Persons "Thrown Away"*
(Ernest Wallace and Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1933, 1945)
#14. *Suicide from Overwhelming Shame* (in Archive only)
(Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1940)

Arapaho

#15. *The Rarity of Suicide; When the Camp Moved*
(M. Inez Hilger, 1935–42)

Sioux

#16. *Suicide among Sioux Women*
(John Bradbury, 1809–11)

Cheyenne

#17. *Two Twists in Battle*
(Karl N. Llewellyn and Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1941)

Mandan

#18. *Smallpox and the End of a Household*
(Alfred W. Bowers, 1930–31)

Crow

#19. *Crazy-Dog Wishing to Die*
(Robert H. Lowie, 1913)

#20. *The Lowest of the Low* (in Archive only)
(William Wildschut, 1918–27; 1960)

Gros Ventre

#21. *Singing the 'Brave-Song'*
(Regina Flannery, 1940–48)

Blackfoot

#22. *Suicide to Avoid Marriage*
(George Bird Grinnell, 1888)

#23. *The Sandhills* (in Archive only)
(Adolf Hungry Wolf, 1977)

#24. *Kit-sta-ka Rejoins her Husband After the Sun Dance* (in Archive only)
(Walter McClintock, 1910)

#25. *When Wakes-Up-Last Murdered All of his Children* (in Archive only)
(Walter McClintock, 1968)

SOUTHWEST AND THE GREAT BASIN

Navajo

#26. *Notes on Navajo Suicide* (in Archive only)
(Leland C. Wyman and Betty Thorne, 1945)

#27. *The Destination of Witches and Suicides*
(Leland C. Wyman, W. W. Hill, and Iva Ósanai 1942)

#28. *Reasons for Suicide* (in Archive only)
(D. Leighton and C. Kluckhohn, 1947)

#29. *Ending One's Life by Wishing to Die*
(Franc Johnson Newcomb, 1915–40)

#30. *Crazy Violence* (in Archive only)
(B. Kaplan and D. Johnson, 1964)

#31. *Navajo Suicide* (in Archive only)
(Jerrold E. Levy, 1965)

Hopi

#32. *Making Arrangements for Suicide*
(Edmund Nequatewa, 1936)

#33. *How the Hopi Marked the Boundary Line* (in Archive only)
(Edmund Nequatewa, 1936)

#34. *Girls Going* Qövisti
(Mischa Titiev, 1932–40)

Ute

#35. *Postmenopausal Women*
(John Wesley Powell, 1867–80)

Pueblo

#36. *Suicides as Cloud Beings* (in Archive only)
(Elsie Clews Parsons, 1939)

#37. *Ritual Revenge*
(Ruth Benedict, 1934)

Jicarilla Apache

#38. *Apache War Customs*
(M. E. Opler, 1936)

Mojave

#39. *The First Death: Matavilye, and Suicide in Childbirth, Weaning, and Twins*
(George Devereux, 1961)

WEST AND NORTHWEST COAST

Pomo

#40. *Psychological Suicide* (in Archive only)
(B. W. Aginsky, 1934–35)

Wintu and others

#41. *Suicide in Northeastern California*
(Erminie W. Voegelin, 1937)

Klamath

#42. *The Stigma of Suicide*
(Lucy Thompson, 1916)

Salish

#43. *Strained Sex Relations*
(V. F. Ray, 1928–30)

#44. *Suicide by Hanging*
(W. Cline, 1930)

Kwakiutl

#45. *Shame*
(Ruth Benedict, 1934)

Talkotin

#46. *Barbarities Practised on Widows*
(Ross Cox, citing Duncan M'Gillivray, 1794–95)

Tlingit

#47. *Holding Others Responsible for Suicide*
(Aurel Krause, 1881–82)

#48. *Slaves: An Honor to Die at the Master's Funeral*
(Albert F. Niblack, 1887)

#49. *Paying Damages for Suicide*
(Livingston F. Jones, 1893–1914)

Kaska

#50. *Suicide and Intoxication*
(John Joseph Honigmann, 1943–45)

In the 15th and 16th centuries—prior to contact with Europeans—it is estimated that there were perhaps 70 million people inhabiting the western hemisphere, perhaps one-fifth of the global population at the time. Native Americans are understood to have crossed a land-bridge connecting North America with Asia beginning roughly 13,000 years ago, probably in at least three migrations involving land travel or small boats hugging the coastline. Some evidence from gene-frequency distributions and

DNA clocks in contemporary indigenous populations suggests that the earliest migrations may have occurred even earlier. There are archaeological claims of finds as early as 33,000 B.C.; evidence remains speculative. As North America was populated, the new inhabitants adapted to local environments and developed a large variety of cultural patterns; some groups remained in the Arctic and northern regions; others continued southward through Central America and on into South America. Only about a tenth of the population of the western hemisphere at its height, just before contact with Europeans, lived in North America; greater population density occurred closer to the equator.

As with indigenous peoples in other areas of the world, nomenclature for the original settlers of a region varies. North American native peoples are usually categorized by similar geographic location and related sociocultural practices. Europeans originally called the inhabitants of North America "Indians," reflecting Columbus's error in thinking he had reached the Far East. North American indigenous peoples are also referred to as First Nations, First Peoples, Amerindians, and Native Americans. Distinct groups traditionally called "tribes" (as they are in many of the selections provided here) are now often referred to as "nations," reflecting both their traditional culture and current legal status. Regional groupings of Native Americans, associated (though in somewhat varied ways) by language groups, cultural patterns, and DNA linkages, include the peoples of the Eastern Woodlands (both North and South), the Plains, the Southwest and the Great Basin, and California and the Northwest Coast, to name the areas from which selections are included here. Although this is not customary in some scholarly fields, the selections in this volume follow an east-to-west pattern because of the rough chronology of widespread European contact. The selections preserve the nomenclature for groups and locations used in the originals in each case. Arctic, Mesoamerican, and Caribbean peoples are treated in other sections of this volume.

Although Native American groups did not keep written records, access to many oral traditions and ceremonies has been preserved by two principal means. First, ethnographic accounts, primarily of the groups of eastern North America and, to a lesser degree, the Plains, come from early explorers and missionaries sent to convert the Indians; however, as Lyle Campbell puts it, these reports were often "armchair nonsense." There were some good accounts of many of the Iroquoian groups, particularly by Lewis Henry Morgan, from the 1870s onward, but the rise of scientific ethnography is usually attributed to the influential work of Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his many students. After that time, ethnographers attempted to document the beliefs and customs of the more removed tribes by getting an insider's view of social norms and rules; they tried to shun descriptions in terms of outside comparisons, judgments, or assumptions, though one may question to what degree they, as outsiders, succeeded. Second, in recent decades work by various by 20th-century Native Americans recounts the "old ways," usually by interviewing the eldest members of their tribes; here, information about traditional views and practices comes from an insider's point of view, but it is of substantially later date.

For both kinds of source, the problem of cultural overlay subsequent to European contact is considerable. The early explorers, missionaries, and ethnographers came into contact with peoples uninfluenced by European thought, but their reports were often heavily biased by their own religious and political convictions—as is particularly evident, for example, in patronizing remarks like Lafitau's comment that "[t]he Indians are enlightened enough to distinguish good from evil" (see selection #5), where he is reporting a response he believes coincides with Western views of suicide from Virgil on. Informants were also often selective in what they were willing to tell outsiders. On the other hand, contemporary Native American insiders' reports of the "old-ways" may be more sensitive to the nuances of traditional thinking, but the groups themselves have been in contact with European and other thought for as many as three or four hundred years, and these societies have in any case been fully disrupted from the time of contact on by disease and severe population reduction, wars, slaving (in diverse areas), the acquisition of the horse, and other factors. Insiders gave accounts of the "old ways" that were also

sometimes tailored to fit agendas—sometimes to claim rights to land by modifying historical traditions, sometimes to make missionaries think their beliefs were more similar to Christianity than they in fact were, sometimes to gain whites' technology to give them an advantage in disputes with hostile tribes, and so on. Then, too, accounts from either sort of source may draw on interpretations or misinterpretations of individual behavior, as in Landes's account of an Ojibwa woman who felt she was becoming a windigo *(selection #1)—whether explained as a psychosis brought on by chronic food shortage or the product of hostile accusations—that nevertheless reveal something about traditional Native American beliefs about suicide: in this case, that she had "an undisputed right to dispose of herself as she chose."*

A survey of the full range of Native American beliefs about suicide, as closely as they can be approximated, reveals a number of contrasts and connections. For example, many groups drew a moral distinction between voluntary, self-initiated death in battle and voluntary, self-initiated death in other contexts. Charging wildly into the ranks of the enemy with the intent to die, for example, was seen as an act of honor and courage, while hanging oneself from a tree was condemned. Yet even when suicide was condemned, the degree of disapproval was often comparatively light. In contrast with European religion, which at the time of contact almost uniformly saw suicide as gravely sinful and punished by an afterlife in hell, several Native American traditions held that the "punishment" comes from the ghosts of other deceased people who themselves banish the suicide out of fear. Several tribes, including the Natchez, seem to have engaged in a practice analogous to the East Indian sati*, and in some groups "widow-burning" was expected of both females and males; in other groups, attempts at self-immolation appear to have been socially expected but also routinely thwarted by other members of the tribe. On the other hand, various ethnologists, anthropologists, and other observers explicitly report few or no cases of suicide in many groups, including the Maricopa, the Tubatulabal, the Bella Coola, the Ojibwa, the Hare, the Montagnais, the Lee Islanders, the Arapaho, the Dhegiha, some of the Pomo, the Plateau Yumans, the Southern Paiute, and the Zuni (selections from some of these groups are presented here). For the most part, contemporary outsiders' stereotypes of suicide-related practices among Native Americans have been confined to that custom in which migratory groups abandon elderly or infirm members by the side of the trail (not actually evident in most groups), but in fact the full range of Native American beliefs and practices about suicide is far more complex. After all, there were as many as 500 tribes in continental North and Central America, about the same number in Mesoamerica and lower Central America, and some 1,500 in South America at the time of contact, each with differences from the others.*

The accounts presented here span some 300 years and are arranged in geographic rather than chronological order. Some date from the immediate post-contact period; some are quite recent, drawn from the comparatively insulated environment of the reservations set up by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which isolated Native American peoples in the United States. As with all oral cultures evolving in part in response to outside contact, it is not possible to determine with certainty the exact nature of pre-contact, historical views of suicide as yet uninfluenced by outside forces, and the reliability of later observers is always in question; yet even given these difficulties, the overall picture they present of the ethics of suicide as seen by these cultures is compellingly different from those of Western observers.

The Selections

Northeast

The indigenous groups of what is now eastern Canada and the United States inhabited woodland territory, and the groups are thus often referred to as Eastern Woodlands Indians. Although central New York State is often considered the home of the Iroquoian groups, some 12 Iroquoian languages were spoken from the St. Lawrence River to the South Carolina-Georgia border. This language family (which included the Huron and the Cherokee) also refers to the Five (and

eventually Six) Nations—the Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, Seneca, and Onondaga, followed later by the Tuscarora—that formed a loose confederacy known as the League of the Iroquois. Selections #1 and #2 provide comparatively recent accounts of suicidal behavior in this region.

Jesuit missionaries began visiting the Hurons around 1610; their correspondence gives us the earliest account of Native American beliefs concerning suicide. The letters of the Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf to his superior Father Paul le Jeune (1635, 1636), compiled together with reports from other missionaries in a form now known as *Le Jeune's Relation* [selection #3], depict the afterlife as is it understood by the Hurons, noting that suicides (like those who have died in war, but unlike thieves) are relegated to different villages in the afterlife than other souls, and are feared and ostracized, but also that death might be sought in certain circumstances. (Brébeuf himself, a French Catholic captured by the enemy Iroquois, went fearlessly to his death, martyred at the stake.) Wallace's early account (selection #4, quoting LeMercier, a Huron of the 1600s) describing Seneca life and the matter of suicide in children, suggests that either it is the product of great impulsivity or that it is a trivial action. Lafitau's account (selection #5, 1712–17; 1724) observes that although those who committed suicide are denied communication with other souls of the dead, the Iroquois committed suicide for even the smallest reproach. Concerning widows, Lahontan observes (selection #6, 1692–1703) that they were often driven to suicide by lack of an appropriate partner, and (in selection #7) that widows who dreamt of their departed loved ones twice in the six months following the death were permitted to commit suicide in order to be reunited with the deceased spouse. Although the Iroquois were said to often commit suicide to avoid suffering and captivity, Lahontan also narrates with evident astonishment a case in which a prisoner tortured severely under the auspices of the French nevertheless "ran to his death with a greater unconcernedness, than Socrates would have done" (selection #7). In selection #8, also describing attitudes that may have been similarly inconsistent, Mary Jemison, who lived with the Iroquois around the time of Handsome Lake, reports that Jack and Doctor, two Squawky Hill Indians who had killed her son, contemplated the terrors in the afterlife for those who commit suicide, yet one of them decided to poison himself regardless of the consequences.

The Seneca prophet Ganioda'yo, or Handsome Lake, who revitalized the Iroquois after their defeat in the American Revolution, reinforces traditional beliefs with Christian theological ideas. Selection #9, from Handsome Lake's Code or "Great Message" (the *Gaiwiiye*), was recited from memory by Handsome Lake's half-brother Gaiant'wake (Edward Cornplanter, one of six authorized "holders" of teachings of Handsome Lake's religion) after an original version from about 1850 was lost; it was translated in 1913 for Arthur C. Parker by William Bluesky. The passage explores the notion of the afterlife, alluding to a belief found in other Native American groups, especially the Mojave, that infants before, at, and just after birth are capable of making choices about whether to enter into or continue in life. Some choose not to do so: deaths among infants are deliberate. This passage also alludes to the concept of allotted life; for "the number of our days is known in the spirit world." In selection #10, Edward Cornplanter's son Jesse Cornplanter explores this concept in relation to suicide: going against the fate of one's allotment of life displeases the Great Spirit and dooms one to wander the unpleasant reaches of the afterlife; the notion of "sin" employed in this text is an example of Handsome Lake's importation of Christian theological ideas.

Southeast

Native Americans, who had no immunity to diseases brought by Europeans, succumbed in enormous numbers to measles, typhus, plague, influenza, malaria, yellow fever, and especially

smallpox, a disease of extremely high mortality that also produced scarring and blindness in those it did not kill outright. Selection #11 describes shame-associated suicides among the Cherokee, including those that occurred during the smallpox epidemic of 1738–39. James Adair's account focuses not only on the forms of shame associated with ritual pollution and disfigured personal appearance, but the perceived failures of divine powers among the religious leaders, who were unable to stop the epidemic. An account from the Plains Mandan (see selection #18) also describes the social consequences of smallpox.

According to an early observer, the Natchez, a people inhabiting the resource-abundant area surrounding the lower Mississippi River who had a very complex, stratified social structure and an advanced civilization with state-level organization, appear to have practiced a form of *sati*: after an individual who belonged to the ruling clan passed away, the widow or widower and other chosen family members and retainers would allow themselves to be strangled in a public ritual. The custom applied to both females and males. Jean-Bernard Bossu's *Travels* (selection #12, 1751–62, 1771) tells of several potential suicides associated with this custom. First there is the youth Etteacteal, who had married into the blood of the ruling Suns but, now that he is expected to submit to strangulation upon the death of his wife, attempts to avoid it. Then there is the favorite wife of Bitten Snake, the great war chief of the Natchez, who faces death with equanimity. And finally, there is the Chief Sun, who is restrained from suicide by the French. Nevertheless, institutionally expected consent to being killed, cooperation in being killed, or undertaking of suicide upon the death of one's spouse is far less frequent in North American native cultures than in those of South America, Africa, India, or Pacific Island cultures, perhaps in part explained by the fact that small-scale hunter-gatherer groups with precarious survival situations, as many indigenous American groups were (though not the Natchez), could less well afford the loss of tribe members.

The Plains

Moving roughly east to west and south to north among the Native American cultures of the Plains, several divergent concepts of suicide emerge. Self-senicide, or self-killing by the elderly, is reported among the Comanche (selection #13). Among the Arapaho, suicide is said to be rare, although traditional accounts are reported here of elderly people asking to be left behind when the camp of this migratory group moves on. John Bradbury, an early American traveler, reports (in selection #16, 1809–11) that the Sioux saw killing oneself as an affront to the "Father of Life," and those who took their own lives were destined to carry around the lethal instrument in the afterlife as punishment. For this reason, it was said that women who hanged themselves to evade maltreatment hanged themselves on the smallest tree that would support their weight, and in general those who committed suicide chose means of doing so that would involve the least burdensome load to carry into the next life.

Furthermore, while taking one's own life was frowned upon and discouraged by certain beliefs about the afterlife, in some Plains Indian groups like the Cheyenne and Crow, giving oneself up to die in battle was seen as an act of courage and self-sacrifice, both honorable and socially approved, quite different from the self-inflicted type of suicide that was strongly denounced.

To increase honor, a Plains brave might seek a glorious death in battle. Unlike the negative aura surrounding grievance suicides, death-in-battle suicides were held up as examples of courage and sacrifice. Hoebel's account of the Cheyenne warrior Two Twists (selection #17) suggests that the act of *seeking* death in battle could be sufficient to secure honor, and did not require the actual death of the individual. Two Twists' wild charge into battle was enough to earn him great respect; it also compensated for Red Robe's grief in losing his sons at the hands of the enemy.

However, if the person proclaiming a wish to die did not act with suicidal intensity in battle—and hence at a real risk of death—prestige was lost and ridicule followed.

This ideal of a glorious death in battle was even more fully developed among the Crow (selection #19) and also occurred among the Gros Ventre (selection #21). Lowie reports in 1913 that among the Crow, an individual who became weary of life would announce that he was to become a "Crazy Dog." From that point forward, the "Crazy-Dog-Wishing-To-Die" would say the opposite of whatever he meant (i.e., "talk crosswise") and would seek death at the first opportunity. One possible connection between the phenomenon of "talking crosswise," announcing the death wish, and suicidal behavior is the conjecture that, under normal circumstances, human beings do not seek or wish for death; in similar fashion, our communications do not normally signify the opposite of what is transmitted. In cross talk, communication is reversed and, analogously, death is sought instead of life. If a Crow who announced himself as committed to the life of a Crazy-Dog-Wishing-To-Die did not seek death, he became a laughing stock; he did not serve the tribe instrumentally by being courageous in battle and remained untrue to his word. Comanche informant reports collected by Hoebel (1940) (selection #13), reporting similar practices, also suggest that the threat of suicide was a means of social control. A suicide threat was used to call attention to a perceived wrong; the threat also served to call down societal rebuke upon those who had wronged the individual making the suicidal threat. Indeed, social responsibility for suicide was often assigned to a second party, and causing a suicide was essentially seen as homicide. The "cleansing of the arrows" ceremony was performed after either suicide or homicide to alleviate the bad luck brought on by such actions. Suicide was a way of recovering lost prestige or increasing it.

Wildschut's 1918–27 fieldwork among the Crow (selection #20), in contrast, presents quite a different picture, in which suicides (and murderers) were regarded as the lowest of the low.

Among the Blackfeet, according to Grinnell (selection #22), suicide was quite common among girls facing marriage, for whom no choice was permitted. The same was true for individuals unlucky enough to be showing the early signs of fatal disease. Suicide also had a strong familial element. Adolf Hungry Wolf, recounting the "old-ways" of the Blackfoot Nation (selection #23), intimates that a dead person's spirit might try to convince the living to accompany them into the sand hills, the place of the dead. In a related selection (#24), Kit-sta-ka jumps to her death after the Sun Dance in order to join her husband in the spirit world. Selection #25 records a problem in contact between Native Americans and whites: suicide following murder, associated with alcohol, based on an incident in October 1903.

Southwest

Some Navajo researchers have posited a strong relationship between certain religious customs and conceptions of suicide. Father Berard Haile's account (1942) of the Navajo "Upward Reaching Way" ceremony describes the myth on which it is based. The First Woman, who had originally led people out of the underworld, had died from a hemorrhage. First Woman's husband decides to follow her spirit into death, that is, he chooses to forgo life and join his wife in the Emergence place, where spirits of the dead congregate. The journey to the Emergence place is voluntary, and Haile reports that at least one informant saw this as accounting for later suicides.

Among the Navajo, suicide was frowned upon, but not strongly condemned. Anthropologists Wyman and Thorne (selection #26) argue that the reason it was deemed undesirable was because of the negative effect it had upon family members and others who depended on the deceased. As with the Sioux, those who have committed suicide must carry the lethal instrument with them

in the afterlife. Although suicides arrive at the same destination in the afterlife as everyone else, they are excluded from the sociality that exists there; other spirits fear and ostracize them. This echoes the earlier accounts from the Iroquois: It is not so much a judgmental deity who imposes eternal punishment on the suicide; rather, it is an isolation imposed by a fearful post-mortem society. Jerrold Levy adds (in selection #31) that suicide was not strongly condemned because of a deterministic element in the Navajo worldview: The Navajo is not wholly acting through individual will; rather, suicide is something that happens to a person and is not freely chosen.

As with all the indigenous cultures described here and in other parts of this volume, the identification of practices as "suicide" is itself subject to bias. Like most languages, Navajo has no true term for "suicide"; the closest term is a verb meaning to kill oneself, but there is no nominal expression to describe this behavior as a type or category of act. (Indeed, English had no such term until Walter Charleton pioneered the Latinate construction, *sui-* "self" + *-cide*, "kill," in 1651.)

There is great importance attached to harmony with the natural and supernatural worlds in Navajo beliefs. Illness and other problems in life were thought to be due to a corruption in this harmony. Traditional ceremonies, sometimes lasting days, were thought to rebuild this harmony and restore order to the world and the individual. Coming into contact with a corpse and its attending spirit would serve as one type of disruption; for this reason, the Navajo feared the dead and often were loath to touch a corpse. Thus, the common notion of "suicide as revenge" can be intensified under Navajo religious belief: a well-placed suicide can be an instrument—a weapon—that harms others. Since the Navajo fear contact with a corpse, an individual with a vendetta against another will commit suicide in a place where the hated person will encounter the corpse, and this action will bring bad luck upon the targeted individual.

In 1967, the Hopi storyteller Nequatewa—an insider in the tradition handing down accounts of the "old-ways" and carrying on the tradition of passing down tribal culture by word of mouth from adult males to boys at early maturity—recounted a traditional tale of the Hopi variant of a warrior seeking death in battle. According to this tale, the Hopi arranged battles in which they knew they would die; as part of this custom, the warrior seeking death would wear jewelry that was to be collected as payment by the slayers. The Hopi legend describing the creation of the boundary with the Navajo portrays an arranged death of this sort (selection #33; see also #32). As in the reports of other deaths of this type, it is unclear whether the claim is accurate—Elsie Parsons, for instance, derides this account as an idea of a suicide pact that Nequatewa "worked into a true story" and quotes Ruth Bunzel as claiming that the very idea of suicide is "so remote from [Hopi] habits of thought that it arouses only laughter" (see note in selection #36). It is also unclear whether, even if the practice were true, the Hopi would equate it with other more direct forms of suicide.

While suicide as a revenge strategy was not unknown among the Pueblo, Ruth Benedict observes that not only was suicide outlawed among the Pueblo, but the very concept evoked incredulity and laughter (selection #37). If these were genuinely indigenous attitudes rather than specimens of overlay from European contact, it is somewhat surprising when Parsons observes (in selection #36) that some Pueblo did not believe in any afterlife punishment of suicides; instead, after death, suicides were thought to join believers, good men, and those who "perish in the mountains" (possibly meaning warriors), and would become Lightnings or Cloud Beings.

The explorer John Wesley Powell also reports a variant of self-senicide among the Utes, which he said "made a deep impression upon my mind." (selection #35) The Utes, he says, believe that a woman who lives much beyond menopause will turn into a witch, and that it is better to die than meet such a fate. Many such women commit suicide by voluntary starvation, and he

describes three old women in the process of doing so. Notes by the editor of his text indicate that Powell may not have actually seen these women but was recording a tale or myth about them; nevertheless, his portrayal of them and their final, shuffling dancing is extremely vivid.

Seemingly voluntary death in battle, much as in the Cheyenne, Crow, and Hopi, was also reported among the Jicarilla Apache (selection #38), now residents of northern New Mexico. Here too the warrior is said to divest himself of all ordinary conventions and enter battle with the intent of receiving a fatal wound. Among the Apache, the reversal of the normal order of things, analogous to the Crows' "talking crosswise," is demonstrated by stripping completely naked.

While some Native American groups would constrict their conceptions of suicide (if indeed they had such a concept at all) to exclude voluntary death in battle, the Mojave expanded their conception to include that and more. Devereux, in a long essay in ethnopsychiatry shaped by his own commitment to Freudianism, reports (in selection #39) that the Mojave, urged on by certain religious practices, expanded the rubric of suicide to include stillborn births, the deaths of suckling infants, the deaths of one or both twins, the symbolic death of one who sacrifices an animal upon commencing an incestuous marriage, funeral suicide, certain deaths surrounding witches, and finally, "real suicides"—those suicides that are akin to our modern notions. Drawing on the views of Freud [q.v.], Devereux sees many of these notions as connected to the mythic first death of Matavilye—a death that was willed and actualized by the deity himself.

The Mojave believed that infants were rational, sentient beings. In the continuation of selection #39, Devereux reports the view that some infants decided not to be born and assumed a transverse position at delivery—the buttocks-first exit that often killed both baby and mother. The infant who did this was assumed to be a shaman. Shamans, as a whole, did not wish to have life, and often decided to kill themselves and their mothers at birth. Those infants who survived a transverse birth were expected, and commonly grew up to be, the shamans of their tribes. Many shamans practiced obstetrics, and were often called on to help coax a dangerously positioned baby to accept life and avoid suicide. The Mojave disapproved of those babies who committed suicide in this way; it was viewed as a selfish act. Ordinary infants who died early in life were said to proceed to a "rathole" in the next life. Furthermore, since infants were seen as capable of making choices, the Mojave believed that the death of a recently weaned child was also a voluntary death. Young children who were replaced at the breast by younger siblings were often thought to kill themselves from jealousy. Jealousy was particularly acute among twins, who were commonly thought to be gods. When these infant gods grew to dislike their families, became tired of life, or became jealous of each other or younger siblings, they were thought to kill themselves in order to return to their heavenly abode. This type of suicide was more strongly condemned than the first.

Devereux also claims that the Mojave practiced symbolic suicide at the occurrence of an incestuous marriage. A horse, symbolizing the bridegroom, was killed; this dissolved the extant family connections and created a new person. This new individual, freed from troublesome family backgrounds, was able to marry a member of his former family. Such a suicide was frowned upon not because it was a suicide, but because of the Mojave religious belief that families in which incest had occurred would die out.

Suicide and witchcraft often intersected in Mojave culture. Dying people who rejected the helping favors of the shaman called in to treat them were said to be bewitched. By rejecting treatment, the "bewitched person" who died was said to have committed suicide and was condemned for cooperating with evil forces. Additionally, if a witch was murdered, he was said to have everlasting power over those he had bewitched on earth; thus, every witch who is murdered is said to

commit a vicarious suicide in order to gain this power. Such a "suicide" is not mourned by the tribe or even by his family; it is rather the natural destiny of witches. Furthermore, in Mojave culture, the suicide of braves seeking death in battle (another example of the "Crazy-Dog-Wishing-To-Die" phenomenon) is seen as the natural pathway of the warrior; braves are not meant to grow old. While the Plains Indians may heap honor upon a warrior who died voluntarily in battle, the Mojave are resigned to a sad fatalism.

Informant reports collected by Devereux observe that a minor custom existed among the Mojave in which the survivors of a person who had died attempted to throw themselves onto the funeral pyre. Apparently, this custom was somewhat encouraged and was thought to demonstrate affection. It was restricted to females, however, and males who attempted to jump on the funeral pyre were ridiculed. Since the Mojave came to expect this gesture, other members of the tribe were also called upon to prevent the burning of the individual, thus making actual suicide a rarity; individuals in mourning knew they would be stopped.

Finally, there are what Devereux calls "real" suicides: a competent individual killing him- or herself by direct, self-inflicted injury. For the Mojave, a major motivation for "real suicide" was the belief that it was the best way to honor and be reunited with deceased loved ones. Another major motivation also included distress at having one's feelings hurt. Devereux reports that the act of suicide was generally condemned, and people who committed real suicide (especially for reasons of emotional distress) were often viewed as crazy, weak, or stubborn. However, suicides suffered no special punishment in the afterlife: Those who committed suicide, like all others who died, proceeded to relive their earthly life and even their death before they metamorphosed into something else.

West and Northwest Coast

The Native American nations living in the northern California and Canadian coastal areas are listed here from south to north; the last of these areas adjoin groups included elsewhere in this volume under Arctic Cultures [q.v.]. As with other outsiders' reports of behaviors and practices in orally transmitted cultures, the available accounts are often influenced by a variety of factors, including disciplinary bias, theoretical commitments, and various sorts of ideology. Aginsky's account of a Pomo group (selection #40), for example, is shaped by an emphasis on psychological analysis of native behavior. Accounts of the Wintu and other northeastern California groups collected by Erminie W. Voegelin in 1936 (selection #41) appear eager to demonstrate the existence of suicide practices that other observers do not substantiate, although it is not clear which accounts are accurate. Voegelin insists that suicide has been practiced at least since the coming of Europeans and probably existed among the Wintu before that; suicide due to familial tensions is often brought about by drowning oneself at a sacred spot on the river, and attempted *sati*, or funeral suicide, is tolerated or expected, but (as is also reported in the Mojave) routinely interrupted by bystanders, so that the resulting number of actual suicides by widows was therefore minimal.

Brief accounts from the Klamath (selection #42) and a Salish group (selection #43) depict suicide as shameful and as more common among females than males. Among the Kwakiutl, Ruth Benedict reports (1934) (in selection #45) that suicide was common, and that the most common motive was shame; suicide was seen as a way of overcoming this shame and restoring honor.

The report attributed to the fur trader Duncan M'Gillivray (selection #46) may be even more distorted than other somewhat excessive accounts: M'Gillivray is said to have claimed that among the Talkotin, widows and widowers were forced to endure societally imposed torment by the crematory fire and wash themselves in the melted fat of their deceased spouse, as well as

other hardships lasting over a period of years; these barbarities, he claimed, were understood as a payment for the sins the living spouse had committed against the dead. Many widows subjected to this treatment, he claimed, chose suicide instead.

Some reports also identify cultural assumptions in which the social assignment for responsibility in a suicide is placed on another individual. The accounts of the Tlingit presented here, including that by Jones (selection #49), point to cultural customs in which other individuals are assumed to have caused a suicide and are held responsible for it, in some cases by having the tribe pay damages, or even by giving a life. Of the Tlingit, Niblack (1887) (selection #48) reports of slaves killed at the funerals of their masters, and adds that they considered such a death a great honor, since slaves who were killed in this manner were buried with their masters and would serve them in the next life; any alternative burial would constitute the disrespectful disposal that slaves were usually given.

Lest reports of practices related to suicide seem more unusual the further north their source, this section closes with a contemporary account of a widespread post-contact problem among the Kaska in 1943–45 (selection #50): suicide and suicidal behavior associated with alcohol use introduced by whites.

Many of these reports are drawn from the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University.

NORTHEAST

OJIBWA

[#1] Mrs. Cochran Becoming a Windigo
(R. Landes, 1932–35)

Mrs. John Cochran's mother ordered the disposal of her own self by burning. At about 60 years, she ordered her brother-in-law to kill here, because she said she was becoming a *windigo*, and was afraid she would eat people. Some bad Indian had done this to her. So she had the following orders executed: her brother-in-law was to put a rope around her neck and seat her and hit her once on the head with the blunt end of an ax (traditional mode of stunning bears and gos). Then she would fall forward and be choked. Then they were to strip the tent of its belongings, and burn the tent with her. Her brother-in-law, not her husband, was to do this; if the latter did it she would not die.

A number of persons at one time or another contemplate suicide. Some momentary distress will incite them—such as a mother's scolding of a girl, the loss of a husband's affection, the death of relatives—but a momentary encouragement, like the appearance of a new lover, or a mother's soothing voice, will dissuade them. Some people do commit suicide. Others, who are afflicted with characteristic *windigo* insanity, order themselves burned either before or after death, and no one can gainsay them. Mrs. Cochran felt that she was becoming *windigo*: the people around her looked like beavers and she wanted to eat them. So she ordered her brother-in-law to strait-jacket her, stun her with an ax, and then set fire to her and her tent. While this was done, her husband and children looked on, for she had an undisputed right to dispose of herself as she chose.

Sources

[#1] Ojibwa: "Mrs. Cochran Becoming a *Windigo*," from R. Landes, *Ojibwa Sociology*. *Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology*, Vol. 29, New York: Columbia University, 1937, p. 105; and R. Landes, *The Ojibwa of Canada*, in M. Mead, ed., *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937, p. 101.

MICMAC

[#2] The Gaspesians: Suicide, Shame, and Despair
(Chrestien Le Clercq, 1675–86)

The Gaspesians, however, are so sensitive to affronts which are offered them that they sometimes abandon themselves to despair, and even make attempts on their own lives, in the belief that the insult which has been done them tarnishes the honour and the reputation which they have acquired, whether in war or in hunting.

Such were the feelings of a young Indian who, on account of having received by inadvertence a blow from a broom, given by a servant who was sweeping the house, imagined that he ought not to survive this imaginary insult which waxed greater in his imagination in proportion as he reflected upon it. "What," he said to himself, "to have been turned out in a manner so shameful, and in presence of so great a number of Indians, my fellow-countrymen, and after that to appear again before their eyes? Ah, I prefer to die! What shall I look like, in the future, when I find myself in the public assemblies of my nation? And what esteem will there be for my courage and my valour when there is a question of going to war, after having been beaten and chased in confusion by a maid-servant from the establishment of the captain of the French. It were much better, once more, that I die." In fact he entered into the woods singing certain mournful songs which expressed the bitterness of his heart. He took and tied to a tree the strap which served him as a girdle, and began to hang and to strangle himself in earnest. He soon lost consciousness, and he would even infallibly have lost his life if his own sister had not happened to come by chance, but by special good fortune, to the very place where her miserable brother was hanging. She cut the strap promptly, and after having lamented as dead this man in who, she could not see any sign of life, she came to announce this sad news to the Indians who were with Monsieur Denys. They went into the woods and brought to the habitation this unhappy Gaspesian, who was still breathing though but little. I forced open his teeth, and, having made him swallow some spoonfuls of brandy, he came to himself, and a little later he recovered his original health.

His brother had formerly hung and strangled himself completely, in the bay of Gaspé, because he was refused by a girl whom he loved tenderly, and whom he sought in marriage. For, in fact, although our Gaspesians, as we have said, live joyously and contentedly, and although they sedulously put off, so far as they can, everything which can trouble them, nevertheless some among them fall occasionally into a melancholy so black and so profound that they become immersed wholly in a cruel despair, and even make attempts upon their own lives.

The women and the girls are no more exempt than the men from this frenzy, and, abandoning themselves wholly to grief and sadness caused either by some displeasure then may have received, or by the recollection of the death of their relatives and friends, they hang and strangle

themselves, as formerly did the wives and daughters of the Milesians, whom only the apprehension of being exposed wholly nude in the public places, according to law that was made expressly for this purpose, kept from committing like cruelties. Nothing, however, has been effective up to the present in checking the mania of our Gaspesian women, of whom a number would miserably end their lives if, at the time when their melancholy and despair becomes known through the sad and gloomy songs which they sing, and which they make resound through the woods in a wholly dolorous manner, some one did not follow them everywhere in order to prevent and to anticipate the sad effects of their rage and fury. It is, however, surprising to see that this melancholy and despair become dissipated almost in a moment, and that these people, however afflicted they seem, instantly check their tears, stop their sighs, and recover their unusual tranquility, protesting to all those who accompany them, that they have no more bitterness in their hearts: ". . . There is my melancholy gone by; I assure thee that I shall lament no more, and that I have lost any intention to hang and strangle myself."

Source

[#2] Micmac: "The Gaspesians: Suicide, Shame, and Despair," from Chrestien Le Clercq, *New Relation of Gaspesia* [1675–86], Toronto: Champlain Society, 1910, pp. 247–250.

HURON

[#3] Le Jeune's Relation
(Jean de Brébeuf; Father Paul Le Jeune, 1635–36)

[The Hurons] believe in the immortality of the soul, which they believe to be corporeal. The greatest part of their Religion consists in this point. There are, besides, only superstitions, which we hope by the grace of God to change in to true Religion, and, like spoils carried off from the enemy, to consecrate them to the honor of our Lord, and to profit by them for their special advantage. Certainly, if, should they some day be Christians, these superstitions help them in proportion to what they do for them now in vain, it will be necessary that we yield to them, or that we imitate them; for they spare nothing, not even the most avaricious. We have seen several stripped, or almost so, of all their goods, because several of their friends were dead, to whose souls they had made presents. Moreover, dogs, deer, fish, and other animals have, in their opinion, immortal and reasonable souls. In proof of this, the old men relate certain fables, which they represent as true; they make no mention either of punishment or reward, in the place to which souls go after death. And so they do not make any distinction between the good and the bad, the virtuous and the vicious; and they honor equally the interment of both, even as we have seen in the case of a young man who had poisoned himself from the grief be felt because his wife had been taken away from him. . . .

. . . The souls which are stronger and more robust have their gathering place toward the West, where each Nation has its own Village; and if the soul of an Algonquin were bold enough to present itself at the Village of the Bear Nation's souls, it would not be well received.

The souls of those who have died in war form a band by themselves; the others fear them, and do not permit their entry into their Village, any more than to the souls of those who have killed themselves. As to the souls of thieves, they are quite welcome, and if they were banished from them, there would not be a soul left.

Sources

[#3] Huron: Le Jeune's Relation: "Relation of what occurred among the Hurons in the year 1635," "Relation of what occurred in New France in the year 1636," and "Relation of what occurred in the Country of the Hurons in the year 1636," in Edna Kenton, ed., *The Indians of North America*, Vols. 8, 9, 10 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1896, 1927, pp. 228, 236–237, 256–257).

[#4] The Suicide of Children (in Archive only) (Anthony F.C. Wallace, citing Le Mercier)

IROQUOIS

[#5] Suicide (Father Joseph François Lafitau, 1712–17)

This Land of Souls has also its different levels and all are not equally good. One of our missionaries drew this conclusion from what he heard a young girl say. This girl, seeing her sister dying from the quantity of water hemlock [*Cicuta maculata*] which she had taken in anger and determined not to take an antidote to save herself, wept bitterly and tired to appeal to her sister by the ties of blood and affection which united them. She repeated over and over, "It is then over, thou wishest us never to find one another again, never to see one another again?" The missionary, struck by these words, asked her the reason for them. "It seems to me," he said, "that you have a Land of Souls where you are all to be united with your ancestors; why then, dost thou speak in this way to thy sister?" "It is true," she answered, "that we are all going to a Country of Souls but the wicked, particularly those who have destroyed themselves by a violent death, bear there the penalty of their crime; they are separated by it from the others and have no communication with them; that is the reason for my sorrow," In like manner, Virgil assigns a separate corner of Hades to Dido and a number of others who had been the unhappy victims of their own despair.

The Indians are enlightened enough to distinguish good from evil. Conscience leaves no one in ignorance. It is not surprising that they have known, like others, that there were penalties reserved for crime and recompenses destined for virtue.

The worst punishment given them [children] when they are still little is to throw water in their faces or to threaten them with it: when they grow older, the mothers satisfy themselves with pointing out to them their duties, which they are not always of a mind to obey. No one, moreover, would dare strike and punish them. In spite of that, the children are docile enough, they have sufficient deference for the members of their lodge, and respect for the elders from whom one scarcely ever sees them emancipated; a thing which indicates that in methods of bringing up children, gentleness is often more efficacious than punishments, especially violent ones. The Indians in general are, besides, so sensitive, that, for a little too bitter a reproach, it is not unusual to see them poison themselves with water hemlock and do away with themselves.

Source

[#5] Father Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, eds. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore (Paris, 1724; Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1974, pp. 254–55, 301).

[#6] Suicide of the Widowed
(Baron de Lahontan, 1703)

The Citrons of North-*America* are so call'd, only because their form resembles that of our Citron. Instead of a Rind, they have only a single Skin. They grow upon a Plant that rises three Foot high, and do's not bear above three or four at a time. This Fruit [the may apple or mandrake, *Podophyllum*] is as wholsom as its Root is dangerous; for the one is very Healthy, and the juice of the other is a mortal subtile Poyson. While I stay'd at Fort *Frontenac*, in the year 1684, I saw an *Iroquese* Woman take down this fatal Potion, with a design to follow her deceas'd Husband; after she took leave of her Friends, and sung the Death Song, with the Formalities that are usual among these blind Wretches. The Poison quickly work'd the desir'd effect; for this Widdow, who in *Europe* would be justly look'd upon as a miracle of Constancy and Fidelity, had no sooner swallowed the murdering Juice, than she fell into two or three shivering Fits, and so expir'd.

. . .The Women have no opportunity of Marriage after the Fiftieth Year of their Age; for the Men of the like Age allege, that since they cannot then bear Children, 'twould be a piece of Folly to meddle with them; and the young Sparks affirm, that their wither'd Beauty has not force enough to Charm them, at a time when there is no scarcity of Buxsome young Girles. In this Distress, when the young Men will not use them as Mistresses, and Men of riper Years refuse them for Wives, if their Complexion be any thing Amorous, they are forc'd to adopt some Prisoner of War that is presented them, in order to answer their pressing Necessities.

When the Husband or Wife comes to dye, the Widowhood does not last above six Months; and if in that space of time the Widow or Widower dreams of their deceas'd Bedfellow, they Poyson themselves in cold Blood with all the Contentment imaginable; and at the same time sing a sort of tune that one may safely say proceeds from the Heart. But if the surviving Party dreams but once of the Deceased, they say, that the Spirit of Dreams was not sure that the dead Person was uneasie in the Country of Souls, forasmuch as he only pass'd by without returning, and for that reason they think they are not oblig'd to go keep him Company.

Source

Louis Armand Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North-America*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, Vol. 1, 1703. Chicago, A.C. McClurg, 1905, p. 368.

[#7] The Song of Death
(Baron de Lahontan, 1703)

The Chevalier *Beaucour* return'd again to the Colony with his Party, and brought along with him twelve Prisoners of the *Iroquese*, who were immediately conducted to *Quebec:* After they arriv'd, Mr. *Frontenac* did very judiciously condemn two of the wickedest of the Company, to be burnt alive with a slow Fire. This Sentence extreamly terrified the Governour's Lady, and the Jesuits; the Lady us'd all manner of supplication to procure a moderation of the terrible Sentence, but the Judge was inexorable, and the Jesuits emply'd all their Eloquence in vain upon this occasion. The governour answered them, "That it was absolutely necessary to make some terrible examples of Severity to frighten the *Iroquese;* That since these Barbarians burnt almost all the *French*, who had the misfortune to fall into their Hands, they must be treated after the same manner, because the Indulgence

which had hitherto been shown them, seem'd to authorize them to invade our Plantations, and so much the rather to do it, because they run no other hazard, than that of being taken, and well kept at their Master's Houses; but when they should understand that the *French* caus'd them to be burnt, they would have a care for the future, how they advanc'd with so much boldness to the very Gates of our Cities; and in fine, That the Sentence of Death being past, these two wretches must prepare to take a Journey into the other world." This obstinacy appear'd surprizing in Mr. *Frontenac*, who but a little before had favour'd the escape of three or four Persons liable to the Sentence of Death, upon the importunate prayer of Madam and the governess; but though she redoubled her earnest Supplications, she could not alter his firm resolution as to these two Wretches. The Jesuits were thereupon sent to Baptize them, and oblige them to acknowledge the Trinity, and the Incarnation, and to represent to them the Joys of Paradise, and the Torments of Hell, within the space of eight or ten hours. You will readily confess, Sir, that this was a very bold way of treating these great Mysteries, and that to endeavour to make the *Iroquese* understand them so quickly, was to expose them to their Laughter. Whether they took these Truths for Songs, I do not know; but this I can assure you, that from the Minute they were acquainted with this fatal News, they sent back these good Fathers without ever hearing them; and then they began to sing the song of Death, according to the custom of the Savages. Some charitable Person having thrown a Knife to them in Prison, he who had the least Courage of the two, thrust it into his Breast, and died of the Wound immediately. Some young *Hurons* of *Lorette*, aged between fourteen and fifteen years, came to seize the other, and carry him away to the *Diamant Cape,* where notice was given to prepare a great pile of Wood. He ran to death with a greater unconcernedness than *Socrates* would have done, if he had been in his case. During the time of Execution he sung continually; "That he was a Warriour, brave and undaunted; that the most cruel kind of Death could not shock his Courage, that no Torments could extort from him any Cries, that his Companion was a Coward for having killed himself through the fear of Torment; and lastly, that if he was burnt, he had this Comfort, that he had treated many *French* and *Hurons* after the same manner. All that he said was very true, and chiefly as to his own courage and firmness of Soul; for I can truly swear to you, that he neither shed Tears, nor was ever perceiv'd to Sigh; but on the contrary, during all the time that he suffer'd the most horrible Torments that could be invented, and which lasted about the space of three hours, he never ceas'd one Minute from singing. The soles of his Feet were roasted before two great Stones red hot, for more than a quarter of an hour; the tops of his Fingers were scorch'd in a Stove of lighted Pipes; during which Torture he did not draw back his Hand. After this the several joynts of his Body were cut off, one after another: The Nerves of his Limbs and Arms were distorted with a little Iron Wand, after such a manner, as cannot possibly be express'd. In fine, after many other Tortures, the hair of his Head was taken off after such a manner, that there remain'd nothing but the Skull, upon which these young Executioners were going to throw some burning Sand, when a certain Slave of the *Hurons* of *Lorette*, by the order of Madam Governess, knock'd him on the head with a Club, which put an end to his Martyrdom. As to my self, I vow and swear, that the Prologue of this Tragedy, created in me so great a Horror, that I had not the curiosity to see the end of it, nor hear this poor Wretch sing to the last moment of his Life. I have seen so many burnt against my Will, amongst those People where I sojourn'd, during the course of my Voyages, that I cannot think of it without trouble.' Tis a sad Spectacle, at which every one is obliged to be present, when he happens to Sojourn among these Savage Nations, who inflict this cruel kind of Death upon their Prisoners of War; for as I have told you in one of my Letters, all the Savages practice this barbarous Cruelty. Nothing is more grating to a civil Man, than that he is oblig'd to be a Witness of the Torments

which this kind of Martyrs suffer; for if any one should pretend to shun this Sight, or express any Compassion for them, he would be esteem'd by them a Man of no Courage.

Source

Louis Armand Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North-America*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, Vol. 1, 1703. Chicago, A.C. McClurg, 1905, p. 266-270.

SENECA

[#8] Murder and Suicide (in Archive only) (Mrs. Mary Jemison, 1817)

[#9] The Code of Handsome Lake (Recited by Edward Cornplanter to Arthur C. Parker, 1850)

"'Now it is said that your people must change certain customs. It has been the custom to mourn at each recurring anniversary of the death of a friend or relative. It is said that while you are upon the earth you do not realize the harm that this works upon the departed.

"'Now moreover it is said that when an infant is born upon the earth with which the parents are dissatisfied, it knows and says, "I will return to my home above the earth.'"

Source

[#9] "The Code of Handsome Lake," section 67, from *Parker on the Iroquois*, ed. William N. Fenton (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968, pp. 56–57).

[#10] The Suicide as Earthbound (Jesse Cornplanter, n.d.)

And our belief is that for anyone who will destroy his own life, his spirit will always be earth-bound. My father [Edward Cornplanter, speaker and ritual holder in Newtown longhouse who recited the Code of Handsome Lake to Arthur C. Parker] used to say that the spirit [of a suicide] will just wander around where the [water hemlock] plants grow, and it will always be expecting another person to follow its example. Indians [Senecas] believe it is a sin to take one's own life, to shorten the span of days which the Great Spirit has given to each one of us; therefore as a punishment he shall not go on the path to the spirit-world, but shall always remain on earth among the plants which he took for death.

A maple leaf is the thickness of the partition between us and the dead. A person who has died of violence—witchcraft poisoning, suicide, and murder remains earth-bound until judgment day.

Source

[#10] The Seneca: William N. Fenton, *Iroquois Suicide: A Study in the Stability of a Culture Pattern*, Bureau of American Ethnology Anthropological Papers, No. 14 (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, 1941, p. 89).

SOUTHEAST

CHEROKEE

[#11] Varieties of Shame: Time of Death, Pollution, and the Disfigurement of Smallpox
(James Adair, 1775)

I have heard the speaker, on these occasions, after quoting the war actions of their distinguished chieftains, who fell in battle, urging them as a copy of imitation to the living—assure the audience, that such a death, in defence of their beloved land, and beloved things, was far preferable to some of their living pictures, that were only spending a dying life, to the shame and danger of the society, and all of their beloved things, while others died by their virtue, and still continue a living copy. Then, to soften the thoughts of death he tells them, they who died in battle are only gone to sleep with their beloved forefathers; (for they always collect the bones) —and mentions a common proverb they have, *Neetak Intáhāh*, "The days appointed, or allowed him, were finished." And this is their firm belief; for they affirm, that there is a certain fixt time, and place, when, and where, every one must die, without any possibility of averting it. They frequently say, "Such a one was weighed on the path, and made to be light;" ascribing life and death to God's unerring and particular providence; which may be derived from a religious opinion, and proverb of the Hebrews, that "the divine care extended itself, from the horns of the unicorn, to the very feet of the lice." And the more refined part of the old heathens believed the like. The ancient Greeks and Romans, who were great copiers of the rites and customs of the Jews, believed there were three destinies who presided over human life, and had each of them their particular office; one held the distaff of life, while another spun the thread, and Atropos cut it off: a strong but wild picture of the divine fire, light, and spirit. When Virgil is praising the extraordinary virtue of Ripheus, who was killed in defence of his native city, Troy, he adds, *Diis aliter visumest*,—submitting to the good and wise providence of the gods, who thought fit to call him off the Stage. However, he seems to be perplexed on the subject; as he makes fate sometimes conditional;

> Similis si cura fuisset,
> Nec pater omnipotens Trojam nec fata vetabant
> Stare,

"If the usual proper care had been taken, neither Jupiter nor fate would have hindered Troy from standing at this time." But if the time of dying was unalterably fixed, according to the Indian system, or that of our fatalists, how would its votaries reconcile the scheme of divine Providence? which must be in conformity to truth, reason, and goodness,—and how explain the nature of moral good and evil? On their principle, self-murder would be a necessary act of a passive being set on work by the first mover; and his obligations would be proportionable, only to his power and faculties; which would excuse the supposed criminal from any just future punishment for suicide. But religion, and true reason, deny the premises, and they themselves will not own the consequence.

Though the Indians do not use salt in their first-fruit-oblation till the forth day; it is not to be doubted but they formerly did. They reckon they cannot observe the annual expiation of sins, without bear's oil, both to mix with that yearly offering, and to eat with the new sanctified fruits;

and some years they have a great deal of trouble in killing a sufficient quantity of bears for the use of this religious solemnity, and their other sacred rites for the approaching year; for at such seasons they are hard to be found, and quite lean. The traders commonly supply themselves with plenty of this oil from winter to winter; but the Indians are so prepossessed with a notion of the white people being all impure and accursed, that they deem their oil as polluting on those sacred occasions, as Josephus tells us the Jews reckoned that of the Greeks. An Indian warrior will not light his pipe at a white man's fire if he suspects any unsanctified food has been dressed at it in the new year. And in the time of the new-ripened fruits, their religious men carry a flint, punk, and steel, when they visit us, for fear of polluting themselves by lighting their pipes at our supposed *Loak ookproose*, "accursed fire," and spoiling the power of their holy things. The polluted would, if known, be infallibly anathamatized, and expelled from the temple, with the women, who are suspected of gratifying their vicious taste. During the eight days festival, they are forbidden even to touch the skin of a female child: if they are detected, either in cohabiting with, or laying their hand on any of their own wives, in that sacred interval, they are stripped naked, and the offender is universally deemed so atrocious a criminal, that he lives afterwards a miserable life. Some have shot themselves dead, rather than stand the shame, and the long year's continual reproaches cast upon them, for every mischance that befalls any of their people, or the ensuing harvest,—a necessary effect of the divine anger, they say, for such a crying sin of pollution.

About the year 1738, the Cheerake received a most depopulating shock, by the small pox, which reduced them almost one half, in about a year's time: it was conveyed in to Charles-town by the Guinea-men, and soon after among them, by the infected goods. At first it made slow advances, and as it was a foreign, and to them a strange disease, they were so deficient in proper skill, that they alternately applied a regimen of hot and cold things, to those who were infected. The old magi and religious physicians who were consulted on so alarming a crisis, reported the sickness had been sent among them, on account of the adulterous intercourses of their young married people, who the past year, had in a most notorious manner, violated their ancient laws of marriage in every thicket and broke down and polluted many of the honest neighbours bean-plots, by their heinous crimes, which would cost a great deal of trouble to purify again. To those flagitious crimes they ascribed the present disease, as a necessary effect of the divine anger; and indeed the religious men chanced to suffer the most in their small fields, as being contiguous to the town-house, where they usually met at night to dance, when their corn was out of the stalks; upon this pique, they shewed their priest-craft. However, it was thought needful on this occasion, to endeavor to put a stop to the progress of such a dangerous disease: and as it was believed to be brought on them by their unlawful copulation in the night dews, it was thought most practicable to try to effect the cure, under the same cool element. Immediately, they ordered the reputed sinners to lie out of doors, day and night, with their breast frequently open to the night dews, to cool the fever: they were likewise afraid, that the diseased would otherwise pollute the house, and by that means, procure all their deaths. Instead of applying warm remedies, they at last in every visit poured cold water on their naked breasts, sung their religious mystical song, *Yo Yo, &c.* with a doleful tune, and shaked a calabash with the pebble-stones, over the sick, using a great many frantic gestures, by way of incantation. From the reputed cause of the disease, we may rationally conclude their physical treatment of it, to be of a true old Jewish descent; for as the Israelites invoked the deity, or asked a blessing on every thing they undertook, so all the Indian Americans seek for it, according on the remaining faint glimpse of their tradition.

When they found their theological regimen had not the desired effect, but that the infection gained upon them, they held a second consultation, and deemed it the best method to sweat their

patients, and plunge them into the river,—which was accordingly done. Their rivers being very cold in summer, by reason of the numberless springs, which pour from the hills and mountains—and the pores of their bodies being open to receive the cold, it rushing in through the whole frame, they immediately expired: upon which, all the magi and prophetic tribe broke their old consecrated physicpots, and threw away all the other pretended holy things they had for physical use, imagining they had lost their divine power by being polluted; and shared the common fate of their country. A great many killed themselves; for being naturally proud, they are always peeping into their looking glasses, and are never genteelly drest, according to their mode, without carrying one hung over their shoulders: by which means, seeing themselves disfigured, with hope of regaining their former beauty, some shot themselves, others cut their throats, some stabbed themselves with knives, and others with sharp-point canes; many threw themselves with sullen madness into the fire, and there slowly expired, as if they had been utterly divested of the native power of feeling pain.

I remember, in *Tymáse*, one of their towns, about ten miles above the present Fort Prince-George, a great head-warrior, who murdered a white man thirty miles below *Cheeòwhee*, as was proved by the branded deerskins he produced afterward—when he saw himself disfigured by the small pox, he chose to die, that he might end as he imagined his shame. When his relations knew his desperate design, they narrowly watched him, and took away every sharp instrument from him. When he found he was balked of his intention, he fretted and said the worst things their language could express, and shewed all the symptoms of a desperate person enraged at his disappointment, and forced to live and see his ignominy; he then darted himself against the wall, with all his remaining vigour,—his strength being expended by the force of his friends opposition, he fell sullenly on the bed, as if by those violent struggles he was overcome, and wanted to repose himself. His relations through tenderness, left him to his rest—but as soon as they went away, he raised himself, and after a tedious search, finding nothing but a thick and round hoe-helve, he took the fatal instrument, and having fixed one end of it in the ground, he repeatedly threw himself on it, till he forced it down his throat, when he immediately expired. —He was buried in silence, without the least mourning.

Source

[#11] Cherokee: "Varieties of Shame: Date of Death, Pollution, and the Disfigurement of Smallpox," from James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005, pp. 90–91, 152, 252–53. Originally published: London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775.

NATCHEZ

[#12] The Favorite Wife of the Chief Sun
(Jean-Bernard Bossu, 1751–62)

After sailing eighty leagues from the capital of Louisiana, we arrived at the Natchez post, which was an important one twenty years ago but is insignificant today. The fort is situated on a high point overlooking the Mississippi. The Natchez, who lived here formerly, were a very important people. They had several villages ruled by individual chiefs, who in turn were governed by the great chief of the entire nation. All of these chiefs were called "Suns," and all five hundred of them were related to the Great Sun, their sovereign, who wore on his chest a picture of the sun from which he claimed descent. *Ouachil*, the name under which the sun was worshipped, means "very great fire" or "supreme fire."

The ceremonies of this sun cult were rather august. The high priest arose before sunrise and walked solemnly at the head of his people. He carried a calumet, and, in order to honor the sun, blew the first puff of smoke in its direction. Staring at the sun's first rays and extending his arms towards the sky, each worshiper howled in turn after the high priest. Then they all prostrated themselves. The women brought their children to this ceremony and made them assume the positions required by the rite.

At harvest time in July, the Natchez had a very important celebration. They first blackened their faces, took purifying baths, and fasted until three in the afternoon. The oldest man in the nation then offered God the first fruits of the harvest.

They had a temple in which burned an eternal flame. The priests, who were very careful to keep the fire going, were permitted to use the wood of only one type of tree. If, by chance, the fire went out, the horrified nation put the responsible priests to death. This happened very rarely because the guardian priests, pretending to light their pipes, would ask for "profane" fire, since they could not use the "sacred" fire for this purpose, and would then rekindle the flame.

When the sovereign died, his wives and several of his subjects were put to death so that they could accompany him to the grave. The lesser Suns carefully followed the same custom. According to the law, when a female relative of the Suns died, her husband was put to death too. Here is the story of an Indian named Etteacteal, who was unwilling to submit to this law. He had married into the Sun family, an honor which almost ended in disaster for him. When his wife fell sick and seemed to be dying, he fled down the Mississippi in a pirogue and arrived in New Orleans. He gained the protection of Governor de Bienville by becoming his hunter. The governor interceded for him with the Natchez, who stated that Etteacteal had nothing to fear since the funeral ceremony had already taken place without him and he no longer of any use.

Etteacteal, thus reassured, dared to make several trips to his nation without taking up permanent residence there. He happened to be there at the time of the death of Bitten Snake, a relative of his late wife and brother of the Chief Sun. It was decided that he would have to pay his debt. Since Monsieur de Bienville had been recalled to France, the Natchez chief decided that the letters of reprieve granted to Etteacteal were null and void, and he had him seized. In the war chief's cabin, where he was put with the other victims to be sacrificed to Bitten Snake, Etteacteal gave way to his feelings of grief. The dead man's wife was to be sacrificed, too, but she watched the preparations for her death calmly and seemed eager to join her husband in death. Hearing Etteacteal's groans, she said to him, "Aren't you a warrior?" He answered, "Yes, I am." She replied, "Still, you are crying. Life is dear to you! Since you feel that way, it's not right for you to come with us. Go off with the women." Etteacteal said, "Certainly life is dear to me. I should like to walk upon this earth until the death of the Great Sun; then I would die with him." The woman answered, "Go away, I tell you. It is not right for you to come with us and for your heart to remain behind on earth. Again I say, go away so that I shall not have to look at you."

Etteacteal did not wait for her to repeat her order; he took off like a bolt of lightning. Three old women, two of whom were relatives of his, tired of life because of their age and their infirmities, offered to pay his debt. None of them had been able to walk for a long time. Etteacteal's two relatives had hair which was no grayer than that of 55-year-old French women. The other woman was 120 years old and had very white hair, a rarity among the Indians. None of the three had very wrinkled skin. They were put to death early in the evening, one at bitten Snake's door, the other two in the temple square.

The generosity of these women redeemed Warrior Etteacteal's life. His honor, which had been blemished by his fear of death, was restored to him. He lived in peace from that time on, and, profiting by the education he received during his stay among the French, he became a witch doctor and used his knowledge to fool his fellow tribesmen.

The day after this execution, they began to prepare the procession. At the appointed hour, the leader of the ceremony, dressed in the ornaments appropriate to his rank, appeared at the door of the cabin out of which came the victims who were to accompany the prince to the Land of the Spirits. These were his two wives, his chancellor, his physician, his favorite servant, and some old women who had volunteered to be sacrificed.

The favorite wife went up to the Chief Sun, who was with several Frenchmen, to say good-by to them. She ordered that the Suns, who were her children, be brought to her and she spoke these words to them: "My children, this is the day when I must tear myself from your arms to follow the footsteps of your father to the Land of the Spirits. If I were to yield to your tears, I would fail in my duty and my love. I have done enough for you by bearing you next to my heart and nursing you at my breasts. Should you who were formed of his blood and fed with my milk be shedding tears? Rejoice in the fact that you are Suns and warriors. You must set examples of firmness and valor for the entire nation. I have provided for all your needs by obtaining friends for you. My friends and the friends of your father are also yours. I leave you among them. They are the French, who have tender hearts and are generous. Be worthy of their esteem by not disgracing your race. Always deal with them honestly and never ask their help for base reasons."

"And you, Frenchmen," she added, turning toward our officers, "I leave my orphaned children in your hands. They will know no other father but you; you must protect them."

She then arose and, followed by her group, entered her husband's cabin with surprising firmness.

A noble lady, who decided to accompany Bitten Snake to the other world because of her friendship for him, voluntarily joined the number of victims. The Europeans called her Gloria because of her majestic bearing, her proud look, and the fact that she would bother with only the most distinguished Frenchmen. They felt her loss keenly. She was familiar with many herbs which she used to save the lives of a good number of our sick. This moving sight filled them with grief and horror. The dead man's favorite wife then arose and said to them with a smile on her lips: "I die without fear; my last moments are not marred by grief. I leave my children in your hands. When you see them, noble Frenchmen, remember that you loved their father and that to the very grave he was a sincere and true friend of your nation, which he loved more than his own life. It has pleased the Master of Life to call him, an in a little while I shall go to join him. I shall tell him that I saw your hearts grieve at the sight of his body. Do not mourn, for we shall be friends in the Land of the Spirits for even a longer time than here. There is no death there." [At the appointed time of the ceremony, the victims swallowed balls of tobacco to numb their senses. Then they were strangled and laid out on mats, with the favorite on the right, the other wife on the left, and then all the other victims according to their rank.]

These sad words brought tears to the eyes of all the French. They did all that they could to keep the Chief Sun from killing himself. He was inconsolable at the death of his brother to whom he used to delegate the burdens of government. He became furious when his attempts were resisted. He held his rifle by the breech, while the Sun who was his heir held it by the lock,

causing the powder to spill out. The cabin was full of Suns, nobles, and the Esteemed, all of whom were trembling, but the Frenchmen reassured them by having all the Chief Sun's arms hidden and by filling the barrel of his rifle with water so that it could not be used for some time. When the Suns saw that their chief's life was assured, they thanked the French by shaking hands with them without saying a word. There was a deep silence, for grief and respect restrained the great number of people who were present.

During this ceremony, the Chief Sun's wife was sized with fear. When she was asked if she were sick, she answered in a loud voice, "Yes, I am." She continued more softly, "If the French leave, my husband and all the Natchez will die. Please stay, brave Frenchmen, for your word has the force of arrows. Who would have dared do what you have done? You are true friends to him and his brother."

According to the law, the Chief Sun's wife would have been forced to follow her husband to the grave; that was doubtless the reason for her fear and her gratitude to the French who wanted him to live.

The Chief Sun held his hand out to the officers and said, "My heart is so heavy that my eyes, although they are open, did not see that you were standing. My mouth did not open to tell you to be seated. Excuse my deep grief."

The French replied that it was unimportant, that they were going to leave him alone, but that they would no longer be friends if he did not give the order to light the fires again, first lighting his own in their presence. [The chief sun had given the order to extinguish all fires. This is done only when the sovereign himself dies.] They also said that they would not leave him until his brother had been buried.

He shook hands with all the Frenchmen and said, "Since all the chiefs and the noble officers want me to remain on this earth, so be it; I will not kill myself. Let all the fires be lighted again immediately. I shall wait for death to unite me with my brother. I am already old, and until my death, I shall walk with the French. If not for them, I would have gone off with my brother and the paths would have been covered with dead bodies."

Source

[#12] The Natchez: *Jean-Bernard Bossu's Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751–1762*, tr. and ed. Seymour Feiler (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962, pp. 31–37).

GREAT PLAINS

COMANCHE

[#13] Elderly Persons "Thrown Away"
(Ernest Wallace and Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1933, 1945)

When the condition of an elderly person became hopeless, he was, usually "thrown away" by all except his most faithful relatives and friends; and sometimes even they would desert him. This was not due so much to lack of affection and sympathy as from fear of the evil spirits and his ghost, which were believed to have taken possession of his body. When he felt death drawing

near, he made disposition of all of his property and retired to a quiet spot to die. After making medicine in preparation, an old man might take his own life, and at least one case is known where a man took the life of his wife by cutting her throat because she was hopelessly ill and lonely.

Source

[#13] Comanche: "Elderly Persons 'Thrown Away,'" from Ernest Wallace and Edward Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches* [field dates 1933, 1945]. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952, p. 149.

[#14] Suicide from Overwhelming Shame (in Archive only) (Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1940)

ARAPAHO

[#15] The Rarity of Suicide; When the Camp Moved (M. Inez Hilger, 1935–42)

Suicide was a rare event among the Arapaho. A person who committed suicide, it was believed, would not enter the same place in life after death as did other Arapaho. "That's what they claimed."

In the very early days very old people sometimes asked to be left behind to die when the camp moved. If the old person had only distant relatives, the wish was sometimes granted; near relatives were never known to do so. A Southern informant related one such instance:

Our old people tell how persons who were a hundred years or older would ask to be left to die when camp was moving. They tell of a woman who was left like that at her own request at a place in Wyoming, now called Hell's Half Acre (east of Casper, between Casper and Hudson). We were still with the Northern Arapaho at this time. On the following morning when the men went to look for her, she could not be found. She had disappeared. There were no tracks of her own or of any beasts to be found. It was thought that maybe a beast had devoured her. She was never heard of again. It was after that that the peculiar formations in the cave at Hell's Half Acre began to be formed.

Most informants were agreed that only persons who committed suicide had died in a bad state since they had not had time to again become good persons. . . . Some informants, however, said that suicides did not continue to live after death. Still others said that they did, but only after they had roamed on earth longer than the conventional 4 days. . .. . . . Arnold Woolworth, an 80-year-old Southern man, said: . . . The only ones we thought did not live on were those that had committed suicide. . . .

Rarely did anyone commit suicide. A person doing so was thought not to enter the place in life after death to which other Arapaho went.

. . . Since all adult persons were believed to have premonition of death 4 days before it occurred, the only persons who did not have the opportunity to be good persons when death overtook them were suicides. Suicides were, therefore, denied happiness after death.

Source

[#15] Arapaho: "The Rarity of Suicide; When the Camp Moved," from M. Inez Hilger, *Arapaho Child Life and its Cultural Background*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952, pp. 104, 161, 225, 228.

SIOUX

[#16] Suicide among Sioux Women
(John Bradbury 1809–11)

Although the squaws are very ill treated by all Indians, it is said they are treated much worse by the Sioux than any other tribe, whence it follows that mothers frequently destroy their female children, alleging as a reason, that it is better they should die than continue a life so miserable as that to which they are doomed. Amongst the Sioux women, it is also said, suicide is not unfrequent, and the mode which they adopt to put an end to their existence, is, by hanging themselves. They are of opinion that suicide is displeasing to the *father of life*, and believe it will be punished in the *land of spirits* by their ghosts being doomed for ever to drag the tree on which they hung themselves: for this reason they always suspend themselves to as small a tree as can possibly sustain their weight.

Source

[#16] The Sioux: John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 109.

CHEYENNE

[#17] Two Twists in Battle
(Karl N. Llewellyn and Edward Adamson Hoebel, 1941)

Red Robe's two sons were killed by the Crows quite a while back; their father in his grief stood before his lodge in mourning and called out, "All of my horses are for those who take them." He threw the whole herd away, not keeping even one for himself to ride upon.

The Dog Soldiers went out to herd his horses together, because they simply were not going to see the old man afoot. "No one is going to take these horses," they said. Then they sent an old man to see Red Robe.

"Your sons died like men," this messenger reminded him. "They died the glorious death, not in bed sick. Why don't you take back some ponies?"

"No," Red Robe replied, "Maiyun [the Supernatural] wanted my sons to die in battle and it wants that I should be afoot awhile." Whatever they said, they could not budge him.

Finally, four soldier troops [the Elk, Bowstring, Dog, and Fox] decided to go talk to him. He had been a good man in the tribe and here he was destitute. When the camp moved, he was the last to come along. He had nothing to camp with, but just stayed in the open. This on three or four months when the soldiers got together. They all came to Red Robe, but one or two did the talking for them all. "We are begging you to do what we ask you—we are not

alone—see them all—every company among us is here. We still have your horses. Come in among the people."

Still he was unmoved by all their pleading. At last Two Twists, a chief of the Bowstring Soldiers, came forward. "Say yes," he implored the old man. "Say yes, and we will promise you to go to war against the Crows wherever they may be. Say yes, and I'll get revenge for you whatever the risks. If they be in breastworks, I'll drive them out."

"I accept," the bereaved old man finally answered. "I did not want to take those horses back after giving them away. It's like taking back a thing given to a friend."

"No, it is not like that to us," the soldiers all assured him.

So Red Robe came into camp. In the days which followed after, Two Twists prepared his pipe, taking it to all the soldier societies. Everyone smoked, whole troops pledging themselves to vengeance on the Crows. When all was ready the societies moved to the raid in a body. Women and children went too, for the whole tribe was on the march. Two Twists was the leader of them all.

When they had come close to the enemy, Two Twists rode about the camp accompanied by his crier, who called for the people to listen. Two Twists spoke in this vein. "Look at me now. Soon I am about to follow the two sons of Red Robe. My friends, behold me; I shall never return from this raid."

The women all came out of their lodges to gaze at him. They sang him many heartening songs of which one was this—"Only the rocks lie here and never move. The human being vapors away." That night Two Twists sang the war songs of the Bowstring Soldiers.

The people were anxious to face the enemy, but the chiefs held them in. In the meantime the Crow scouts had spotted the Cheyennes and warned their camp. That night they built a breastwork of all their tipis arranged in a semi-circle.

The next morning Two Twists was out in the camp again. "I sing for the last time," he cried. "People, behold me! This is my last time to walk on earth."

From all around folks brought him feathers, to help him in the thing he was to do. They tied them to his war bonnet, to his horse's mane, and to its tail.

At last the fighters went toward the Crow camp. Two Twists led them, armed only with a saber. When they were before the enemy, he ordered his followers to hold back; he had his promise to fulfill. And so they all watched as he rode out alone toward the waiting enemy.

Straight at the tipis and into the breastwork he charged, slashing off the head of a Crow warrior as he broke through. He wheeled about, charging into the thick of them again, working havoc where his sword fell. The Crows shot, but missed and missed. Then our people saw Two Twists disappear among them in hand-to-hand struggle.

Then the Cheyennes charged into the Crows killing them on all sides. Red Robe's wife charged with an ax. Wherever she found a Crow dead or wounded she split his skull to smear the blood of the enemy upon her face and arms [pantomimed by the informant with proper gusto]. Red Robe joined in by cutting the arm from a dead Crow. He carried it into the scalp dance to scare the women with. E-E-E-E—he would hit them in the back with it; they would run screaming.

Two Twists was not killed, and from his deeds he derived the greatest honor. People said he had done his work; they would never let him do so again; he need not fulfill his vow to die. Back in camp, Two Twists sent for Red Robe and his two wives and children. He himself stripped them of their mourning rags and dressed them well. Many things were given to the women, and now Red Robe took back his horses. They, too, participated in the victory joy of the camp.

Red Robe went back to his lodge and in his turn sent for a crier to get Two Twists. Red Robe was accepting felicitations from everybody. To each person who came to greet him he gave a horse. He painted the faces of all adult comers with black charcoal—the symbol of joy in the death of the enemy. Of all his horses he kept only a few for himself, and this time he was not stopped by the soldiers.

At the end, he adopted Two Twists for his son. Two Twists was not a tribal chief then, only the leader of a soldier society; later he was made a big chief, but on that one occasion he had charge of the whole tribe. He had wanted to wear the Medicine Hat in the battle, and he had told the keeper he wished to wear it, but the keeper gave no answer. It was the keeper's wife who refused him. "You are going to war never to return. I do not think it right for us to give you the Hat. You will get it bloody; you would bring us great trouble; blood on the Hat would mean blood for all the tribe."

Suicide is self-inflicted homicide and very much a cultural fact expressing definite social patterns rather than a mere individual urge. While to the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest the notion of self-slaughter is so alien that one is reliably informed that the Pueblo imagination cannot even formulate a conception of the act, among the Cheyennes, as with the other Plains Indians, suicide played an important social role. Death courted on the field of battle could be sought as an act of great public service . . . as a means of self-effacement when life appeared empty and pointless, and above all as a face-saving and protest device with legal repercussions; so also, death by self-violence. . . .

. . . Death was not thus the inevitable result of the declared intentions to die in battle. And the Cheyennes did not demand it when the end to be served by the announcement of the intention had been fulfilled. But what a difference is seen in the social reaction to the circumstances under which death was missed without honor. . . . (One thinks of the Crow woman's warning to her brother, "If men become Crazy Dogs and are not killed, they become a laughing stock, they are said to be worthless.")

Possessed of more fortitude . . . was the maiden of whom High Forehead's father-in-law told him long ago. Her lover was killed charging through the enemy. She dressed in her best elk-tooth dress and walked backward off a cliff, singing with her face to the camp, of the greatness of her love and the barrenness of life without him whom she loved alone.

Touching, too, is the story of the old blind man, Spit, who at the Wagon-Box Fight with the United States Army said he was always looking for just such a chance to die, for he was tired of only half seeing his way; where were the soldiers? Young ones took his hand, lined his face toward the firing enemy. Serene, he walked toward death, until a bullet brought it to him. Whenever we led Walks Last by the hand, he in his blindness muttered, "If only I had been brave as a youth, I would never have come to this." He would have died in glory, in his prime.

Cheyenne suicide as a legal, or better, extra-legal proceeding, involved more than shame or grief or weariness or glory; it was an appeal, direct and extreme, to justice beyond the law—and so, in its groping way, for better law.

Source

[#17] Cheyenne: "Two Twists in Battle," from Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941, pp. 3–6, 158–165.

MANDAN

[#18] Smallpox and the End of a Household
(Alfred W. Bowers, 1930–31)

Suicide was rare among the Mandan. The only instances remembered by Mandan informants were immediately following the last smallpox epidemic. When a household had been nearly exterminated, the remaining females frequently took their lives. Crow Heart thought that suicides were buried and that their spirits did not reach the spirit world.

Source

[#18] Mandan: "Smallpox and the End of a Household," from Alfred W. Bowers, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950, p. 100.

CROW

[#19] Crazy-Dog Wishing to Die
(Robert H. Lowie, 1913)

The [Crow] custom of seeking death as a Crazy Dog individually seems to be relatively old. When a man for some reason became tired of life, he announced himself a Crazy Dog. This implied that he must thenceforth "talk crosswise," that is, express the opposite of his real intentions and do the opposite of what he was bidden. His most essential duty, however, was to rush into danger and deliberately seek death. This obligation, curiously enough, was limited to one season. If at the end of this period he had by chance escaped death, the Crazy Dog was absolved from his pledge, unless he voluntarily renewed it for another season. Thus, Onehorn's father-in-law was dissatisfied with the way rations were issued by the Government and became a Crazy Dog; the first year he failed to get hurt, but he did not wish to live any longer, again assumed the insignia and manners of a Crazy Dog for the following season, and was killed. Naturally, while the number of Crazy Dogs varied from year to year, it was never very great. During some seasons there was no one that was especially eager to court death; on the other hand, One-horn remembers as many as five Crazy Dogs at one time. The usual number seems to have been two. Hunts-to-die, however, made the statement that long ago there were as many as ten Crazy Dogs who went to war; one of them was killed, accordingly the rest also succeeded in being slain.

The most renowned of all the Crazy Dogs was Young-cottontail-rabbit, who was killed within the memory of men still living. His story is known throughout the tribe, and all the incidents in the following narrative by Itsū'ptete were repeatedly confirmed by other old informants.

At the old Agency (on the Yellowstone) they were issuing goods. It was there that I first came to know a Crazy Dog. When the people were seated, before the distribution of goods, a youth came riding on horseback, holding his blanket by his stomach. He used his quirt for a rattle. He came into the circle and began to sing. "What is this?" "This is a youth who has been shot in the knee. His knee is sore. He would like to be like other young men and wishes to die, that is why he acts like this." Then for a long time we did not see him. One evening he came out, looking powerful.

All of us were eager to see him. He made a rattle of baking-powder cans; inside he put beads. It rattled mightily. There was a fine chain on his horse's bridle. His horse could not be seen, he had so much to carry. The youth came, with his gun in his belt. He had a wrist-band of silver-fox skin. He wore a switch and had little braids in front. He had a very fine necklace and shell earrings. His horse was a bald-faced bay that pawed the ground vigorously. We looked at him; the whole camp liked him. He went through the camp singing and swinging his rattle. We did not know he talked crosswise. One man said to him, "Don't dance!" He got off in front of a lodge. His drummer held a drum like this one, and began to sing. The Crazy Dog danced. "I will test myself, I wish to die; I wish to know whether it will be well." He shot down at his foot. Well, I think it will be so," he said. The women liked him very much. He danced every evening. When the Crow moved camp, he sang. When they camped again, he went through the camp singing. The old women cheered him lustily. He always sang at night. When they went on a hunt, the people regarded him as a dog. When they went to kill buffalo, the Crazy Dog went along hallooing. As these dogs act when they see a cow, so he acted in sight of the buffalo. They killed many buffalo and butchered them. The youth packed his horse. When the people camped, he went through camp singing. On the next day they moved, and camped in a coulée. One of the young men was thrown off his horse, which ran away. He rode back to the old camp site to catch the runaway, and found a party of Sioux. There were a few young Crows with him. They drove the Sioux into the bed of a creek; there were breastworks there. The Crazy Dog got there; he wished to die. He went to the edge of the breastworks and shot down at the Sioux, then they killed him. It began to rain violently. The Crazy Dog was lying in the rain water until daylight. The next day we got there, and found him lying in the water. The people wrapped him up and set him on horseback. They conducted him to camp, crying all the way. All the camp mourned grievously. They erected a four-pole scaffold to lay him on, and they planted a lodge pole, to which they tied the Crazy Dog's sash. We moved without him. This is how he was killed. His drum, looking like this one, was hung on the scaffold.

Hunts-to-die knew of another Crazy Dog, who lived in his grandfather's time. He was the handsomest Indian ever seen, and was called Good-crazy-dog; his real name was He-strikes-the-enemy-with-his-brother. At one time the Sioux attacked a Crow band, killing all, including some of Good-crazy-dog's relatives. Good-crazy-dog said, "I am going to die, I will be a Crazy Dog." He bought red flannel for the sashes,[2] making one for each side. He made a rattle out of a buffalo paunch, and tied eagle feathers to one end of it; inside he put beads and little stones. He wore a fine war-bonnet on his head and tied skunkskin ornaments to his moccasins. His necklace was of *bapā'ce* shells, and his earrings of sea-shells. In the back he wore a switch and in front little braids of hair. He rode a fine spotted horse with docked tail; for its trappings he sewed together red and green flannel. When he rode through camp, he began to sing and the old women cheered him. He was killed in battle.

Spotted-rabbit told the following story about a namesake of his who had also been a Crazy Dog.

When Spotted-fish died, he left fifty head of horses to be distributed among his clansmen and fifty to his stepson, Spotted-rabbit. This happened in the autumn. Spotted-rabbit told the people he would catch up with his father in a short while. Accordingly, early in the spring, he became a Crazy Dog. He wished to die before his fifty head of horses were gone, for no one tended them as his father had done. Both his father's and his own clansmen tried to dissuade him, but he paid no attention to them. He bartered several of his horses for red flannel and a war-bonnet, made himself a rattle, and went singing through the camp. People

saw he was going to die and felt sorry for him. The Crow moved along the Missouri toward North Dakota. Some mornings they would find him lying with married women who came to sleep with him. One day, after going through the camp singing, he dismounted and sat down. His mother had some little rawhide bags filled with ripe plums. She handed them to him saying, "An old lady brought this for you. You had better eat and give some to your brother." He untied the bags, pulled out a few plums, looked at them, and said, "I began to be a Crazy Dog early in the spring and did not think I should live so long. Yet here I am today eating plums." He was eating some of the plums, and so was his brother, when the people said, "Some one is coming over there, they look like Dakota." Spotted-rabbit gave his brother a rope and bade him fetch his horse. His brother ran and got the bob-tail pinto always ridden by Spotted-rabbit. Their mother bade a girl get a horse for her, which she did. Spotted-rabbit mounted and rode through camp, singing, followed by his mother. The Crow went toward the hills where the Dakota were. They espied a humpbacked Dakota Crazy Dog and stopped, but Spotted-rabbit went straight on toward the Dakota, who was waiting for him. The Dakota shot Spotted-rabbit in the breast, and killed him. Spotted-rabbit's mother was there. She had her son's body thrown on a horse and led him back. She told them that he had become a Crazy Dog on account of his father's death. She told them to prepare his body so it would not be spoiled and that she would bury him with his father near the site of Ft. Smith. So they prepared a travois, and all moved toward that direction. But they found plenty of buffalo and told the mother they needed the food and would hunt while there was a good chance and lay the corpse in a tree crotch until the next year. So they laid him on a big tree by the river. The next year they wished to bury his body, but they found that beavers had cut the tree and nothing could be found of Spotted-rabbit but a looking-glass deposited with his corpse.

Source

[#19] Crow: "Crazy-Dog Wishing to Die," from Robert H. Lowie, "Military Societies of the Crow Indians" (1913), *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 10(3).

[#20] The Lowest of the Low (in Archive only)
(William Wildschut, 1918–27; 1960)

GROS VENTRE

[#21] Singing the 'Brave-Song'
(Regina Flannery, 1940–48)

The most daring men in battle were said to have been those who wished to die. Men who were grieving over the loss of loved ones were believed to have been especially prone to this indirect method of suicide. Others took this way of gloriously ending their lives out of a sense of pique, or in order to vindicate their honor. In this latter case it was customary for a man who had something discreditable to account for, either on his own part or on the part of some member of his family, to publicly announce that he was about to die by singing the "brave-song" or "death-song" as he rode around the camp circle. This indicated that he would seek the earliest

opportunity of losing his life at the hands of the enemy while accomplishing some particularly outstanding war deed.

In the other type of situation, it was taken for granted that a woman would succumb to the pleas of a man who had publicly announced his intention of virtually committing suicide. Such a man, by singing the "brave-song" as he circled the camp, indicated that he would seize the first opportunity thereafter to encounter the enemy and make no effort to defend himself.

If a brave young man were killed by the enemy, his parents went even further in the expression of their grief, and sometimes had to be restrained from committing suicide.

Source

[#21] Gros Ventre: "Singing the 'Brave-Song,'" from Regina Flannery, *The Gros Ventres of Montana*, Part I [field date 1940–48], Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1953, pp. 92, 191, 205.

[#22] Suicide to Avoid Marriage
(George Bird Grinnell, 1888)

If a girl was told she must marry a certain man, she had to obey. She might cry, but her father's will was law, and she might be beaten or even killed by him, if she did not do as she was ordered. As a consequence of this severity, suicide was quite common among the Blackfoot girls. A girl ordered to marry a man whom she did not like would often watch her chance, and go out in the brush and hang herself. The girl who could not marry the man she wanted to was likely to do the same thing.

Source

[#22] Blackfoot: "Suicide to Avoid Marriage," George Bird Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* [c. 1888]. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1962, p. 216.

[#23] The Sandhills **(in Archive only)**

(Adolf Hungry Wolf, 1977)

[#24] Kit-sta-ka Rejoins her Husband After the Sun Dance
(in Archive only)
(Walter McClintock, 1910)

[#25] When Wakes-Up-Last Murdered All of his Children
(in Archive only)
(Walter McClintock, 1968)

SOUTHWEST

NAVAJO

[#26] Notes on Navajo Suicide (in Archive only) (Leland C. Wyman and Betty Thorne, 1945)

[#27] The Destination of Witches and Suicides (Leland C. Wyman, W. W. Hill, and Iva Ósanai, 1942)

Nature of the Afterworld

All informants agree that the afterworld is like this earth and that the inhabitants live there the same as do the living Navajos, in hogans, with cornfields, herds of sheep, horses, etc., and that they conduct ceremonials. Some say that there are more ceremonials than on earth (especially the "squaw dance") and that they have a better time. Some informants speak of the land of the dead as a barren, desert place, but the majority mention vegetation and seem to feel that it is at least as pleasant as this earth. Some who called the afterworld "dark earth" . . . said that there is darkness there ("no shade, no light, nothing but darkness". . .), but that the inhabitants can see ("just like we can"). . . .

Destination of Witches and Suicides

The majority of informants say that all people go to the same place irrespective of the manner in which they died or of their practices during life. . . .

Morgan's informants, however, claimed that suicides and "mean people" (including witches) live by themselves and do not have any fun, and that the spirits of witches continue their practices in the after-life. ". . . what you do on this earth you will go on doing afterward." "So if you kill someone, then your spirit will go on killing people." We obtained some confirmation as to the perpetuation of customary activities in the following. "People who have shot themselves on this earth must carry a gun around all the time down there. People who have fallen off cliffs travel around just on rocks. People who have hung themselves are found only on trees down there" . . . The Apaches believe in a separate, gloomy place for witches where there is continual work (White Mountain), or poisonous plants, dangerous animals, lizards for food, etc. (Jicarilla.)

We obtained, therefore, no generally accepted ideas concerning punishment of the wicked in the afterworld, or a separate "hell" for the sinful. Apparently the disposition of evildoers (except for a minor idea pattern concerning those most strongly disapproved of socially, e.g. witches), is adequately covered by the idea patterns concerning their ghosts. One of Morgan's informants did say that to be good in this life insured happiness in the afterworld, but this was during conversations concerning witchcraft and moreover the informant was known to have been influenced by Christianity, which may have colored her beliefs.

Source

[#27] Navajo: "The Destination of Witches and Suicides," from Leland C. Wyman, W. W. Hill, and Iva Ósanai, "Navajo Eschatology," *The University of New Mexico Bulletin*, no. 377, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942, pp. 37, 39–40.

[#28] Reasons for Suicide (in Archive only)
(D. Leighton and C. Kluckhohn, 1947)

[#29] Ending One's Life by Wishing to Die
(Franc Johnson Newcomb, 1915–40)

A Navaho believes that he can end his own life by wishing that he may die. Several times I have had Navaho girls or young men tell me that a grand-father or a grand-mother was going to die in a short time. When I asked if the grand-parent was ill, the usual response was, 'No, he is the same as usual, but he wants to die and will live only a little while now.' The old person seldom disappointed the expectations of his relatives.

Source

[#29] Navajo: "Ending One's Life by Wishing to Die," from Franc Johnson Newcomb, *Navajo Omens and Taboos*. Santa Fe, NM: Rydal Press, 1940.

[#30] Crazy Violence (in Archive only)
(B. Kaplan and D. Johnson, 1964)

[#31] Navajo Suicide (in Archive only)
(Jerrold E. Levy, 1965)

HOPI

[#32] Making Arrangements for Suicide
(Edmund Nequatewa, 1936)

The Hopi idea of committing suicide, or "sacrificing themselves" is difficult for a white man to understand, for it is very Oriental.

If a Hopi has enemies, or there is someone who is causing him great misery, he becomes so unhappy that he wishes to destroy himself. But he cannot do away with himself without "losing face" as the Chinese say, or in other words, losing his reputation as a brave man. Therefore, he looks about for someone, or some other tribe, who may be bribed to make a sham attack upon him or upon his village during which he will be killed. It is arranged with the enemy that he will be the first to rush out against them and as soon as he is killed the enemy will promptly retreat.

Of course, a few innocent people may suffer in the melee, but this seems to be regarded only as a regrettable necessity.

A man desiring to make arrangements for his suicide will meet secretly with the "enemy," taking him gifts and between them all the details of the affair will be arranged. It is agreed upon at this time that the victim shall wear all his valuables, such as strings of turquoise, etc., so that the hired assassins may thus receive the remainder of their pay from the body of the "victim." And so it is that the Hopi suicide makes a glorious end!

I am told that many of the Navaho and Ute raids upon the Hopi villages were just such pre-arranged affairs.

Source

[#32] Hopi: Edmund Nequatewa, "Making Arrangements for Suicide," from *The Truth of a Hopi and Other Clan Stories of Shung-opovi*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona Society of Science & Art, 1936, endnote 32.

[#33] How the Hopi Marked the Boundary Line (in Archive only) (Edmund Nequatewa, 1936)

[#34] Girls Going Qövisti (Mischa Titiev, 1932–40)

There is a current belief among the Hopi that boys have more tractable dispositions and better tempers than girls. When a boy has a fight with someone he "doesn't mean it" and soon gets over his anger, but when a girl quarrels she nurses her resentment for a long time afterwards. In fact, it is said that an angry girl may, out of self pity or to spite her parents, decide to die. In such an event she turns her face to the west and refuses to heed the good advice of parents, uncles or medicine men. After a time, even fear and late repentance are of no avail and, despite all efforts to save her, the girl withers away and dies. This type of wilful suicide is called *qövisti* and is carefully distinguished from other self inflicted deaths. Instances of girls dying *qövisti* are freely cited.

Not all girls are said to be endowed with the capacity to become *qövisti* and some readily admit that they have tried it and failed, while others are pointed out as having latent tendencies in that direction. The symptoms are moodiness, sullen silence, and stubbornness. Men are by nature incapable of going *qövisti* as they want to live as long as possible. A native theorist told me that girls were subject to this phenomenon, because they put too high a value on themselves. As prospective mothers on whom the perpetuation of the clan depends, they become so vain (*qwivi*) that they disregard the instructions of their brothers and maternal uncles. Men and women alike are ever ready to admit the temperamental differences between the sexes, and a young woman once told me naïvely that one of the men in the village was "as mean as a girl."

Source

[#34] Hopi: "Girls Going *Qövisti*," from Mischa Titiev, *Old Oraibi: A Study of the Hopi Indians of the Third Mesa*, 1944 [field dates 1932–44]. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971, 1972.

UTE

[#35] Postmenopausal Women
(John Wesley Powell, 1867–80)

They have a belief that a woman who lives much beyond the period of bearing children will turn into a *U-nu-pits*, or witch, and will be doomed to live in a snake skin. It is believed better to die than to meet with such a fate. This is not only the general sentiment prevailing among the people, but great pains are taken to inculcate this belief, and it is quite common for old women to commit suicide, which they do by voluntary starving. I once saw three old women around a fire in a deserted camp. The other members had left sometime before and these had remained behind for the purpose of dying by starvation. When I rode up to the camp they paid no attention to me but sat gazing into the fire for some time and then each one supporting herself by a staff rose to her feet and they joined in a dance which was a shuffling movement, circling around the fire. This dance was accompanied by a chant as follows:

. . . Alas, alas, alas
Alas, alas, alas
Here long enough have I walked the earth
Here long enough have I walked the earth
Enough, enough
Let me die, let me die.

I did not know what it meant at the time, yet it made a deep impression upon my mind, for the song itself and the circumstances, and whole manner of the women was wild and weird in the extreme. When they had chanted for perhaps half and hour in this way they sat down again, mumbling something which I could not understand, and gazing in the fire. They rose again and danced, and again sat down. At last I rode on, and coming a few days afterwards to where the tribe was encamped, I made inquiry and learned that these women had remained behind for the purpose of dying by starvation and that it was considered by the rest of the tribe as being very meritorious.

Source

[#35] Ute: "Postmenopausal Women," from J. W. Powell, *Anthropology of the Numa*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971, pp. 61A, 61B.

PUEBLO

[#36] Suicides as Cloud Beings (in Archive only)
(Elsie Clews Parsons, 1939)

[#37] Ritual Revenge
(Ruth Benedict, 1934)

The Appollonian attitude of the Pueblos toward death cannot outlaw the death of relatives nor the killing of enemies; it can at its best only make them sources of blessing and provide

means of getting past them with the least violence. Homicide, the taking of life within the group, occurs so seldom that there are hardly even tales remembered of it, but if it occurs, it is settled without ado by payment arranged between the kin groups. The taking of one's own life, however, is entirely outlawed. Suicide is too violent an act, even in its most casual forms, for the Pueblos to contemplate. They have no idea what it could be. Pressed to match stories, the Zuñi tell of a man who had been heard to say that he would like to die with a beautiful woman. One day he was called to cure a sick woman, and his medicine involved the chewing of one of their wild medicinal plants. In the morning he was found dead. It is as close as they can come to the idea of the act, and it does not occur to them that he could have taken his life. Their story is only of a man whose death occurred in the form he had been heard to wish for.

The situation that to us parallels our practice of suicide occurs only in folktales. A deserted wife in the tales occasionally asks the Apache to come in four days to destroy the pueblo and hence her spouse and his paramour. She herself cleanses herself ritually and puts on her best clothing. On the appointed morning she goes out to meet the enemy and be the first to fall before them. This, of course, falls within our category of suicide, though they think only of the ritual revenge. 'Of course we would not do that now,' they say; 'she was mean.' They do not get beyond the fact of her vengefulness. She was destroying her fellow villagers' possibilities of happiness, from which she felt herself shut out. In particular she was spoiling her husband's newfound pleasure. The rest of the tale is not really imagined in Zuñi; it is beyond their experience, like the supernatural messenger she gets to carry her message to the Apaches. The more particularly you illustrate the practice of suicide to a Zuñi audience, the more politely and smilingly incredulous they become. It is very strange, the things that white people do. But this is most laughable of all.

The Plains Indians, on the other hand, did far more with the idea of suicide than we do. In many of the tribes a man who saw nothing ahead that looked more attractive to him could take a year's suicide pledge. He assumed a peculiar badge, a buckskin stole some eight feet long. At the end where it dragged behind upon the ground it had a long slit, and the pledger as he took his pledged place in the forefront of their guerilla warfare was staked to his position through the slit in his insignia. He could not retreat. He could advance, for the staking did not, of course, hamper his movement. But if his companions fell back, he must stay in his foremost position. If he died, he at least died in the midst of the engagements in which he delighted. If he survived the year, he had won by his courting of death all the kinds of recognition that the Plains held dear. To the end of his life, when great men publicly recounted their exploits in the constant, recognized boasting contests, he could name his exploits and the year of his pledge. He could use the counts he acquired in joining societies and in becoming a chief. Even a person who did not despair of his life at all might be so tempted by the honours that were attainable in this fashion that he would take the pledge. Or a society might try to pledge an unwilling member. The warrior's pledge was by no means the only way in which suicide was recognized on the plains. It was not a common act among them as it is in some primitive regions, but tales of suicide for love often recur. They could well understand the violent gesture of flinging away one's life.

Source

[#37] Pueblo: "Ritual Revenge," from Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934, pp. 117–118.

JICARILLA APACHE

[#38] Apache War Customs
(M. E. Opler, 1936)

There are a number of other war customs which deserve mention. When older male captives were taken, they were tied to posts and slain by women with lances. Usually these were women who had lost relatives in battle and were taking this means of retaliation. If we are to believe numerous tales and descriptions, the Plains Indians and Jicarilla tried to infuriate each other by the capture or mutilation of children. Jicarilla war songs threatened that the enemy's children should be captives. Jicarilla mothers were specifically ordered to cut the throats of their children rather than allow them to fall into enemy hands. Jicarilla chiefs, when they faced the line of the enemy before conflict, would taunt and be taunted in turn about the impending captivity of their children. Though the Jicarilla took only scalps of enemy men and women, they also took the thumbs and ears of slain enemy children. When very young children were taken captive, however, they were treated quite decently. Their lot, in terms of manual labor, was sometimes more difficult than that of others, but ordinarily they were accepted into Apache life. If they married within the tribe, there was no discrimination whatever against their offspring.

If an enemy woman were taken captive, she could not be molested until she had been brought back and a ceremony had been performed over her. Captive women were not considered fit wives; they were sexually used and sent from camp to camp to do the heavy work. Their children by Apache men, however, were recognized as Jicarilla.

If a Jicarilla had been made captive by the enemy, though only for a day, he was considered unclean, and at his escape or recapture, a ceremony had to be performed over him to "bring him back" to his people. When scalps of slain Jicarilla were recovered, they were brought back to the encampments and there were wailed over.

When a warrior, because of grief or desperation, resolved to sacrifice his life, he divested himself of all clothing, tearing off even his loin-cloth, to signify that he had broken completely with all the ordinary conventions of life. He then threw himself into the thick of the fight and exposed himself until he received a fatal wound.

Source

[#38] Jicarilla Apache: "Apache War Customs," from M. E. Opler, "A Summary of Jicarilla Apache Culture," *American Anthropologist* 38 (1936), p. 213.

MOJAVE

[#39] The First Death: Matavilye, and Suicide in Childbirth, Weaning, and Twins
(George Devereux, 1961)

It is a basic Mohave tenet that all possible events in life, as well as all beliefs, customs, and rituals constituting culture, were established during the period of creation, usually by means of a mythical precedent.

The mythical origin of death.—The precedent for all deaths, from any cause whatsoever, was set by Matavilye. He decided that man had to be mortal, lest the earth should become so crowded that people would have to void their excreta on each other. He was in the primal house when he resolved to die, so as to set a precedent. He was ill at that time and felt the need to defecate. Rising from his bed, he headed toward the door and, according to the Yuma version, on passing near his daughter, he deliberately touched her genitals. According to the Yuma account, it was this act which exasperated his daughter, while according to the Mohave account she was offended because her father wished to void his stools. Be that as it may, the daughter, who was also the first witch, immediately dived into the ground, emerged exactly under her father, and, by swallowing his excreta, bewitched him. Shortly thereafter Matavilye died, as he intended to die, thereby bringing death into being. . . .

If one examines this account, the following points help one to understand the place of suicide in Mohave culture:

(1) *The first death, which is the cause and prototype of all deaths on earth, was due to an act of will: Matavilye decided to die. Otherwise expressed, the prototypal death was a vicarious suicide. . . .*

. . . There exists a radical difference between murder and suicide on the one hand and death from natural causes, such as old age, on the other hand. This difference consists in the fact that it is possible to die of illness or of old age without either imagining or accepting the fact of death, whereas, at least in the human being, both murder and suicide presuppose the idea of death and its acceptance. It is suggested that this fact suffices to explain why intellectual explanations of the origin of death—even when they are heavily tainted with fantasy, as in myths concerning the origin of death—tend to favor theories, hypotheses, and mythical occurrences which include the psychic representation of death and the acceptance of the idea of death, and therefore view either suicide or murder, or some intermediate model, such as the Mohave myth of the death of Matavilye, which blends murder and suicide into a unified whole, as the basic prototype of death. . . .

The Mohave apply the term suicide to the following occurrences:

(1) Certain stillbirths, with or without the simultaneous death of the mother, which are believed to be caused either by the spontaneous unwillingness of a future shaman to be born, or else by the fact that the bewitched nonshamanistic fetus was taught by a witch "the fatal trick" of killing both itself and its mother at birth.
(2) The death of a suckling who, because its mother is pregnant once more, has to be weaned suddenly and therefore allegedly makes itself sick from spite.
(3) The death of one or both twins either at birth or at any time before they get married.
(4) The symbolic or social pseudo-suicide of a man who, on marrying a kinswoman, consents to his own partial social death by allowing a horse to be killed at his wedding. The death of the horse (= bridegroom) supposedly dissolves the bonds of kinship between the future spouses, and enables a "new boy" to marry the "former" kinswoman.
(5) A bewitched person may actually wish to become the victim of the beloved witch and may therefore refuse to cooperate with his or her therapist.
(6) An aging witch may overtly or tacitly incite the relatives of his victims to kill him, so that he can join—and permanently retain his hold over—the beloved ghosts of his victims.

(7) A warrior, weary of life, may deliberately stray alone into enemy territory, in order to be killed.
(8) Funeral suicide.
(9) Real suicide.

. . . It is psychologically interesting that no language (so far as I know) has a special root-word denoting suicide. This suggests that, both historically and psychologically, the concept of self-killing is derived from the concept of killing someone else. . . .

In Mohave, real suicide cannot be designated in less than two words, and vicarious suicide in less than three words. . . .

. . . Generally speaking, the Mohave condemn suicide, and seek to prevent it by all means at their disposal. On the other hand, they do not disapprove to the same extent of all forms of suicide, the intensity of their disapproval being, to a large extent, determined by the actual or imputed causes of the suicidal act. Moreover, even though the Mohave disapprove wholeheartedly of suicide per se, they are quite capable of being lenient toward those individuals whose suicidal motivation seems more or less "adequate" and "reasonable" to them—i.e., toward those with whose despair they are able to empathize. . . .

The suicide of stillborn children is deplored, since it interferes with the perpetuation of the tribe. . . .

The suicide of forcibly weaned babies is viewed somewhat more critically. The sick baby suffering from a weaning trauma is admonished not to be jealous of its unborn sibling and not to begrudge another Mohave the chance to be born.

The suicide of twins elicits a rather ambivalent reaction. On the one hand, in accordance with the theory that twins are heavenly visitors, the Mohave blame those who have offended the twins. On the other hand, however, in accordance with the theory that twins are acquisitive ghosts who return to earth for additional funeral gifts and property, the Mohave blame twins for being overly sensitive and demanding and admonish them to be more tolerant and patient.

The symbolic social suicide of a man who marries his cousin is criticized not so much because it is a form of suicide, but because such a marriage disturbs the smooth functioning of the intratribal system of kin and gens exogamy and also because it jeopardizes the survival of the incestuous couple's entire extended kin.

The willing victims of witches, who refuse to cooperate with their therapists, are blamed for their foolish compliance with the wishes of murderous witches.

The vicarious suicide of witches is viewed as the inevitable consequence of their personality makeup and of their nefarious activities. Hence, persons not related to a slain witch sometimes overtly express their satisfaction over the slaying of the witch. . . . In fact, whenever the guilt of the witch is generally accepted, his own relatives often refuse either to protect him or to avenge him. Thus, the Mohave Indians' disapproval of such witches is not due primarily to their vicarious suicidal behavior; they are criticized for being witches. On the other hand, when the slain shaman is not believed to be a witch, he is sincerely pitied . . . and his killers are condemned. An unjustly accused shaman, who commits suicide is, likewise, pitied rather than blamed. . . .

The suicidally motivated straying of senior warriors into enemy territory is viewed as behavior compatible with the character structure of braves, who know that they are not meant to reach old age. . . .

Here, as in many other contexts, the "official" Mohave reaction seems to be: "It is their nature; they can't help it." Yet there are indications that this superficial tolerance masks quite a lot of resentment, since the lost warrior's male relatives sometimes frustrate the attempts of a shaman to discover, with the help of a medium, his fate and whereabouts.

Funeral suicides elicit a rather complex reaction: while the attempt itself is, more or less, a minor custom, it is not one which has the unambivalent backing of Mohave society. The suicidal attempt of a widow . . . was ridiculed, because her subsequent marriage allegedly proved her gesture to have been hollow exhibitionism. A father who threw himself on the pyre of his son, whom his nagging had driven to suicide . . . was criticized more because of his cruelty toward his son than because of his suicidal gesture. Finally, males attempting to commit funeral suicide are criticized more than females, since funeral suicide is viewed as a typically feminine gesture.

Real suicides are condemned more consistently than other types of suicide. This disapproving attitude is present—at least in theory—even where explicit cognizance is taken of the fact that the suicide has been seriously wronged. This, however, simply means that the Mohave criticize not only the suicide, but also those who have wronged him. The suicidal person is considered "weak" or "crazy" and is said to lack the Mohave Indian's traditional strength of character and stoicism. . . .

In addition to being called "weak and crazy," the person who commits suicide is also blamed for being stubborn, since he refuses to listen to well-meaning persons who try to comfort him and to dissuade him from killing himself [. . . as are others . . .] for causing grief to their relatives and to the community.

Yet . . . the Mohave . . . is far from consistent in his attitude. . . .

On the whole, no great significance should be attached to the Mohave view that suicides are objectionable simply because they are weak enough to experience extreme psychic distress. This attitude is nearly always voiced only in the form of general statements about suicide. Thus . . . whenever a concrete case was discussed [. . . every Mohave] nearly always added a word of regret, made a more or less lame attempt to justify the suicide, or tried at least to arouse compassion for the person who killed himself.

Finally, there is a marked difference in the Mohave Indian's reaction to those who kill themselves because their feelings were hurt in some manner, and to those who kill themselves because they grieve over the death of a brother or relative. The latter are hardly ever described as "crazy" or "weak," perhaps because the idea of following the dead to the land of ghosts pervades many aspects of Mohave culture. . . .

. . . The Mohave view of the white suicide is quite uncharitable and therefore clearly reflects the intensity of his basic condemnation of suicide, even if one makes allowances for the fact that, in Mohave opinion, nearly everything a white does is *necessarily* bad.

The chief difference between the Mohave Indian's evaluation of the suicide of a white person, and of that of a Mohave is that, in his opinion, the Mohave suicide regrettably failed to live up to both ideal and (supposedly) real Mohave standards, whereas the white who killed himself acted in a manner which is (supposedly) precisely what one can expect from members of a characterologically and ethically defective group, which consistently fails to live up even to the most basic standards of human (= Mohave) dignity. . . . In brief, whereas the Mohave suicide is viewed as a *maladjusted* member of an *ethical* society, the white suicide is held to be a *fully adjusted* member of an *unethical* society.

Source

[#39] Mojave: "The First Death: Matavilye, and Suicide in Childbirth, Weaning, and Twins," from George Devereux, *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry and Suicide: The Psychiatric Knowledge and the Psychic Disturbances of an Indian Tribe*. Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 175, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961, pp. 286–289, 291, 308–312, 331–333, 336–341, 344–345, 348–354.

WEST AND NORTHWEST COAST

POMO

[#40] Psychological Suicide (in Archive only) (B. W. Aginsky, 1934–35)

WINTU AND OTHERS

[#41] Suicide in Northeastern California (Erminie W. Voegelin, 1937)

Modern inquiry into the subject of suicide is revealing a growing number of tribes in northeastern California in which suicide was practised.

In my own experience during a summer's ethnographic survey work, [1936] I found either aboriginal or recent cases of suicide acknowledged for exactly half of the groups visited (northern foothill Nisenan, McCloud and Upper Sacramento Wintu, Hat Creek Atsugewi, western and eastern Achomawi, Modoc, Klamath), while the other groups visited explicitly denied the practise (western and eastern Shasta, Hayfork Wintu, mountain, foothill, and valley Maidu, northern and southern mountain Nisenan). Out of this total of sixteen groups, the two Wintu groups are notable in their claim to an old and elaborately patterned form of suicide. Somewhat less clearly delineated procedures prevailed among neighboring groups.

Wintu

. . . This case is said to have occurred "a long time ago." It concerns a man whose wife had insulted him. (My informant commented, "She may have insulted him because she was jealous of him; perhaps he had been going with another woman.") The man took his bow and arrow and went to a sacred spot on the river; when he arrived at the spot he dove in once, then later two or three times more, then again. He was seeking to pick up something on the bottom. But he failed to find anything, so he got out of the water and lay down by the fire; he wanted to sleep and dream.

However he could not sleep because he was so angry. Before daylight he slept a little, but did not dream. He woke up, and started the fire at daylight; by sunup he got up and dove in the water again. When he came out of the water, he lay down on his side; he napped, but had no dreams. So he kept sitting around, thinking, praying, smoking; he kept this up all day, going into the water at intervals and diving around on the bottom. He ate nothing all day.

That night he dove into the water again, four or five times, feeling around on the bottom. At the last dive he found a small hole under a rock, but obtained nothing from the bottom. So he came out of the water and warmed himself by the fire, lying on his side, resting his head on the palm of his upturned hand. This time he fell asleep and dreamt; he saw a black crow in his dream. The crow lit near the man's foot and scratched the man's ankle with his claw. Then the man woke; it was nearly daylight. He pondered over his dream; "I wonder why a crow scratched my ankle?"

He went home early, about the middle of the morning. All his female relatives had acorn mush and salmon ready for him to eat (after his fast for power), but his wife had prepared nothing for him. The man's uncle was there talking to the mountains, praying for the man. All the people told him to come and eat, that he must eat now. But he refused to eat; he said, "Eat, you folks; I guess my wife doesn't want to see me eat; go on, you eat."

His mother and father coaxed him; they said that everyone ate after they came out of a [sacred] spring. His father told him, "You're young; you can go and get another woman; you shouldn't feel badly because this woman has treated you this way. You can take another woman; but now you must eat, my son."

But the man refused to eat; he went to his father's house and stayed there two days and nights, not eating anything.

Then people came from the south and told the people there to come south; that they were going to have a war dance. The man whose wife had insulted him wanted to go; he had an elkskin robe and cap, and a fisherskin quiver. He took these out and left his father's house in the morning and swam in the water. The women told him to eat, and made lunch of acorn bread for him to take; but he would not eat. He was singing all the time.

The party of men he was with camped four or five times; still he would not eat. When the party arrived at their destination there was a big fight. The fighting went on, back and forth; finally, the man's father and brother caught him, because the man was very nearly out of arrows. They advised him to return home.

"No, I'm not going back; I've come down here to die. You go back," the man said. Then he returned to the fight. Finally he was shot by the enemy in the ankle, where the crow had scratched him. His father said, "You're shot; you'd better go back." "No, I came to die," his son replied. So he let the enemy capture him, and kill him, and take his elkhide armor and fisher quiver.

My informant from the Upper Sacramento group of Wintu confirmed the four cases of suicide detailed above, and volunteered the interesting comment that any blame for the act of suicide attached itself to the wives of the suicides, rather to than to the men themselves.

Treatment of the corpse of a suicide was the same as that for persons dying a natural death, provided of course that the body was recoverable. Only the parents of the deceased cried for the dead, however, at the burial of a suicide.

When first questioned on the topic of suicide both McCloud and Upper Sacramento Wintu informants denied that the practice prevailed in aboriginal times. It was only in

connection with another subject, and several hours after I had asked about suicide, that my McCloud informant retailed the first of the cases given above; when she realized my interest in the case she gave the other cases in the same succession in which I have presented them. When I went on to my next informant, among the Upper Sacramento Wintu, I again met with a point blank denial of any cases of aboriginal suicide; but when I briefly outlined the McCloud data this informant nodded immediate agreement and remarked, "Yes, that was what people used to do." There was no hint in his manner that he equated this behavior with suicide as it prevails today.

Conclusions

Assuming that suicide is an old practise among the Surprise Valley Paiute, we find that there is a practically continuous line of distribution for the aboriginal occurrence of suicide procedures from the Surprise Valley Paiute westward through the Achomawi proper and the Hat Creek Atsugewi, to the McCloud and Upper Sacramento Wintu. To the north among the Modoc and Klamath suicide was also practised under aboriginal conditions. As regards the Hammawi Achomawi who are situated between the Surprise Valley Paiute and the Achomawi proper, and who disclaim aboriginal suicide practices, the negative statement of a single informant cannot be taken as the final word on the subject, especially when this informant admits to a recent case of suicide being accomplished by eating wild parsnip root, which was elsewhere an aboriginal procedure.

In the cluster of groups mentioned above, three disparate suicide patterns are encountered. Of these three patterns that of the Wintu has already been discussed in detail. As regards the second pattern, found among the Klamath and Modoc, we lack at present many specific details, but at least one notable fact emerges from our various references to suicide in these two groups. For both the Klamath and Modoc suicide is a romantic gesture, motivated by disappointments in love and, indirectly, jealousy. Women hang themselves, men in some instances drown themselves.

The third pattern, found among the Atsugewi, Achomawi, and Surprise Valley Paiute, may be briefly summarized as follows. Suicide was usually motivated either through jealousy or quarreling; eating wild parsnip root was one of the more generally accepted modes of committing suicide; the bodies of suicides were accorded the same disposal as the bodies of persons dying natural deaths, but only close relatives wailed; suicide was regarded with disapproval, and among most of the groups occurred only rarely. If we were seeking for a more extended areal distribution of this latter, or characteristically northeastern California suicide pattern, we would first of all turn eastward to the Great Basin tribes of Nevada, since among the Modoc and the Klamath to the north there is a definite change in pattern, among the Wintu to the west the pattern is also of a different order, while among the Maidu-speaking people to the south all suicide practises are consistently denied.

Source

[#41] Wintu and Others: Erminie W. Voegelin, "Suicide in Northeastern California," *American Anthropologist* 39:445–456 (1937), pp. 445–449, 454–456.

KLAMATH

[#42] The Stigma of Suicide
(Lucy Thompson, 1916)

The Klamath Indians are very much prejudiced against one taking their own life. They look down on the act, and if one should take his own life, which we call o-motch-ser-mer-yer, there is no chance for them to be saved and they go down the broad road that leads to the old woman and she gives them over to the man in the boat and he takes them over and leaves them in the wilderness where they live in misery until the judgement (sic) day and then are destroyed forever, there being no salvation for them and the family will be looked down upon for many generations to come and held back in taking part in any of their social functions. The children will be shunned by their playmates. The Indian seldom commits suicide and will avoid self-destruction by wishing that some wild animal will take them while they sleep, and of such cases they tell some very weird and touching tales. There was a girl taken by a wild animal. . . .

Another was a young man of good family belonging to the Pee-wan village and he wanted to marry a girl of the upper division. The young woman refused him and this nearly broke his heart, so he went back into the mountains all alone and there he busied himself by trapping and hunting until he had accumulated great riches of valuable furs and other things and was there for a number of years when he returned to his home. He never married and lived to be an old man and all the children called him grandpa. As he became old he also became blind but the children all loved him and any of them were always ready to lead him wherever he wanted to go, and he was always ready to give blessings to the newly married couples and to newly born babies. He always wanted to visit where there was a new born baby. This old man would sweep and keep clean the village, even down to the creek and river, feeling and sweeping the whole day long and when he was tired some of the children would lead him home, and he thus lived to a good old age. So this is the way it would go in accordance with their belief in the hereafter. A Klamath Indian would never commit suicide if there was any way to prevent it on account of the stigma it would place on the family.

Source

[#42] Klamath: Lucy Thompson, *To the American Indian [*later subtitled *Reminiscences of a Yurok Woman*], Eureka, CA: Cummings Print Shop, 1916, pp. 76–77.

SALISH

[#43] Strained Sex Relations
(V. F. Ray, 1928–30)

Strained sex relations sometimes resulted in suicide. When eloping couples were overtaken and brought back it was not uncommon for the girl to kill herself. Forced marriage to an undesirable

husband sometimes resulted in a like action, but more often such a situation was endured for a time until an opportunity to run away appeared. Since she had been married the girl was no longer subject to return to her parents in such a case. A woman ended her life by hanging or by falling forward on her digging stick.

Burke's maternal grandmother committed suicide by hanging. She had been away with a man for several days. Upon her return she was reprimanded by her older sister and told never to see him again. She then took a tumpline and left the house. Her sister thought she was going for wood. Instead she found a fallen log with a limb projecting upward, tied the line around her neck, crawled out on the end of the limb and jumped off.

Male suicide was not as common as female. Men probably never hung themselves but rather thrust a knife into the heart or shot an arrow into the air and ran under it. A Sanpoil man named taxpa-ikst was told that his wife was cohabiting with his brother. He announced that he was going to kill himself. He went out, shot several arrows into the air, ran underneath, but each time one came near he dodged. Then he went into the house, procured a gun and shot himself through the shoulder. After that he called upon his brother, told him what he had done and gave the reason, and told him that he might have his horse for he was going to die. But he did not die. Instead he took back his horse and his wife.

Source

[#43] Salish: V. F. Ray, *The Sanpoil and Nespelem. Salishan Peoples of Northwestern Washington*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1932, p. 149.

[#44] Suicide by Hanging
(W. Cline, 1930)

Some data on suicide was obtained from Johnie Louie which may be added here. The pattern for suicide seems to be by hanging. No one was ever hung for punishment. Suicide was rare among men, but common enough among girls. For instance, if a girl was angry she might kill herself, or if a wife was beaten on unfounded suspicion of adultery she might hang herself. If a girl got a reputation as loose, her father might whip her; she, feeling hurt, might kill herself. A child who suggests something important to its parents, which the latter refuse, has good cause to kill himself for shame. Thus, sixty years ago a man was sent by the priests to convert his family. His father disagreeing, the son shot himself through the mouth. Cecile Brooks said that suicides were more frequent in early days than at present. Women particularly were given to it on such provocation as a parental scolding, a disagreement over betrothal, or the like. They would hang themselves with a pack rope. Men also killed themselves, for example, because of jealousy. "They rigged up some sort of arrangement by which they could release an arrow with their toes."

Source

[#44] Salish: W. Cline, R. S. Commons, M. Mandelbaum, R. H. Post, and L. V. W. Walters, *The Sinkaietk or Southern Okanagon of Washington*. L. Spier, ed., General Series in Anthropology 6:1–262 (1938), p. 127A.

KWAKIUTL

[#45] Shame
(Ruth Benedict, 1934)

The Kwakiutl recognized only one gamut of emotion, that which swings between victory and shame. It was in term of affronts given and received that economic exchange, marriage, political life, and the practice of religion were carried on. Even this, however, gives only a partial picture of the extent to which this preoccupation with shame dominated their behavior. The Northwest Coast carries out this same pattern of behavior also in relation to the external world and the forces of nature. All accidents were occasions upon which one was shamed. A man whose axe slipped so that his foot was injured had immediately to wipe out the shame which had been put upon him. A man whose canoe had capsized had similarly to 'wipe his body' of the insult. People must at all costs be prevented from laughing at the incident. The universal means to which they resorted was, of course, the distribution of property. It removed the shame; that is, it reestablished again the sentiment of superiority which their culture associated with potlatching. All minor accidents were dealt with in this way. The greater ones might involve giving a winter ceremonial, or head-hunting, or suicide. If a mask of the Cannibal Society was broken, to wipe out the count a man had to give a winter ceremonial and initiate his son as a Cannibal. If a man lost at gambling with a friend and was stripped of his property, he had recourse to suicide.

The great event which was dealt with in these terms was death. Mourning on the Northwest Coast cannot be understood except through the knowledge of the peculiar arc of behavior which this culture institutionalized. Death was the paramount affront they recognized, and it was met as they met any major accident, by distribution and destruction of property, by head-hunting, and by suicide. They took recognized means, that is, to wipe out the shame. When a chief's near relative died, he gave away his house; that is, the planks of the walls and the roof were ripped from the framework and carried off by those who could afford it. For it was potlatching in the ordinary sense, and every board must be repaid with due interest. It was called 'craziness strikes on account of the death of a loved one,' and by means of it the Kwakiutl handled mourning by the same procedures that they used at marriage, at the attainment of supernatural powers, or in a quarrel.

There was a more extreme way of meeting the affront of death. This was by head-hunting. It was in no sense retaliation upon the group which had killed the dead man. The dead relative might equally have died in bed of disease or by the hand of an enemy. The head-hunting was called 'killing to wipe one's eyes,' and it was a means of getting even by making another household mourn instead. When a chief's son died, the chief set out in his canoe. He was received at the house of a neighboring chief, and after the formalities he addressed his host, saying, 'My prince has died today, and you go with him.' Then he killed him. In this, according to their interpretation, he acted nobly because he had not been downed, but had struck back in return. The whole proceeding is meaningless without the fundamental paranoid reading of bereavement. Death, like all the other untoward accidents of existence, confounded man's pride and could only be handled in terms of shame.

There are many stories of this behavior at death. A chief's sister and her daughter had gone up to Victoria, and either because they drank bad whiskey or because their boat capsized

they never came back. The chief called together his warriors. 'Now I ask you, tribes, who shall wail? Shall I do it or shall another?' The spokesman answered, of course: 'Not you, chief. Let some other of the tribes.' Immediately they set up the war pole to announce their intention of wiping out the injury and gathered a war party. They set out and found seven men and two children asleep and killed them. 'Then they felt good when they arrived at Sebaa in the evening.'

A man now living describes an experience of his in the '70's when he had gone fishing for dentalia. He was staying with Tlabid, one of the two chiefs of the tribe. That night he was sleeping under a shelter on the beach when two men woke him, saying: 'We have come to kill Chief Tlabid on account of the death of the princess of our Chief Gagaheme. We have here three large canoes and we are sixty men. We cannot go home to our country without the head of Tlabid.' At breakfast, the visitor told Tlabid, and Tlabid said, 'Why, my dear, Gagaheme is my own uncle [sic], for the mother of his father and of my mother are one; therefore he cannot do any harm to me.' They ate, and after they had eaten, Tlabid made ready and said he would go to get mussels at a small island outside of the village. The whole tribe forbade their chief to go mussel-gathering, but Tlabid laughed at what his tribe said. He took his cape and his paddle and went out of the door of his house. He was angry, and therefore none of his tribe spoke. He launched his canoe and when it was afloat his young son went aboard and sat in the bow with his father. Tlabid paddled away, steering away for a small island where there were many mussels. When he was halfway across three large canoes came in sight, full of men, and as soon as Tlabid saw them, he steered his canoe toward them. Now he did not paddle, and two of the canoes went landward of him and one canoe seaward, and the bows of all three canoes were in a line. The three canoes did not stop, and then the body of Tlabid could be seen standing up headless. The warriors paddled away, and when they were out of sight the tribe launched a small canoe and went to tow in the one in which Tlabid was lying dead. The child never cried, for 'his heart failed him on account of what had been done to his father.' When they arrived at the beach they buried the great chief.

A person whose death was determined upon to wipe out another's death was chosen for one consideration: that his rank was equivalent of that of the dead. The death of a commoner wiped out that of a commoner, of a prince that of a princess. If, therefore, the bereaved struck down a person of equal rank, he had maintained his position in spite of the blow that had been dealt him.

The characteristic Kwakiutl response to frustration was sulking and acts of desperation. If a boy was struck by his father, or if a man's child died, he retired to his pallet and neither ate nor spoke. When he had determined upon a course which would save his threatened dignity, he rose and distributed property, or went head-hunting, or committed suicide. One of the commonest myths of the Kwakiutl is that of the young man who is scolded by his father or mother and who after lying for four days motionless upon his bed goes out into the woods intent on suicide. He jumps into waterfalls and from precipices, or tries to drown himself in lakes, but he is saved from death by a supernatural who accosts him and gives him power. Thereupon he returns to shame his parents by his greatness.

In practice suicide was comparatively common. The mother of a woman who was sent home by her husband for unfaithfulness was shamed and strangled herself. A man whose son stumbled in his initiation dance, not being able to finance a second winter ceremonial, was defeated and shot himself.

Even if death is not taken into the hands of the shamed person in actual suicide, deaths constantly are regarded as due to shame. The shaman who was outjuggled in the curing dance, the chief who was worsted in the breaking of coppers, the boy worsted in a game, are all said to have died of shame. Irregular marriages take, however, the greatest toll. In these cases it was the father of the bridegroom who was most vulnerable, for it was the groom's prestige which was primarily raised by the marriage transfer of property and privileges, and his father therefore lost heavily in an irregular marriage.

Source

[#45] Kwakiutl: Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934, pp. 215–219.

TALKOTIN

[#46] Barbarities Practised on Widows
(Ross Cox, citing Duncan M'Gillivray, 1794–95)

The ceremonies attending the dead are very singular, and quite peculiar to this tribe. The body of the deceased is kept nine days laid out in his lodge, and on the tenth it is burned. For this purpose a rising ground is selected, on which are laid a number of sticks about seven feet long, of Cyprus neatly split, and in the interstices is placed a quantity of gummy wood. During these operations invitations are dispatched to the natives of the neighboring villages requesting their attendance at the ceremony. When the preparations are perfected the corpse is placed on the pile, which is immediately ignited, and during the process of burning the by-standers appear to be in a high state of merriment. If a stranger happen to be present they invariably plunder him; but if that pleasure be denied them, they never separate without quarreling among themselves. Whatever property the deceased possessed is placed about the corpse; and if he happened to be a person of consequence, his friends generally purchase a capot, a shirt, a pair of trousers, &c., which articles are also laid round the pile. If the doctor who attended him has escaped uninjured, he is obliged to be present at the ceremony, and for the last time tries his skill in restoring the defunct to animation. Failing in this, he throws on the body a piece of leather, or some other article, as a present, which in some measure appeases the resentment of his relations, and preserves the unfortunate quack from being maltreated. During the nine days the corpse is laid out, the widow of the deceased is obliged to sleep alongside it from sun-set to sun-rise; and from this custom there is no relaxation, even during the hottest days of summer! While the doctor is performing his last operation she must lie on the pile; and after the fire is applied to it, she cannot stir until the doctor orders her to be removed; which, however, is never done until her body is completely covered with blisters. After being placed on her legs, she is obliged to pass her hands gently through the flames, and collect some of the liquid fat which issues from the corpse, with which she is permitted to rub on her face and body! When friends of the deceased observe the sinews of the legs and arms beginning to contract, they compel the unfortunate widow to go again on the pile, and by dint of hard pressing to straighten those members.

If during her husband's lifetime she had been known to have committed any act of infidelity, or omitted administering to him savory food, or neglected his clothing, &c., she is now made to suffer severely for such lapses of duty by his relations, who frequently fling her

on the funeral pile, from which she is dragged by her friends; and thus, between alternate scorching and cooling, she is dragged backwards and forwards until she falls into a state of insensibility.

After the process of burning the corpse has terminated the widow collects the larger bones, which she rolls up in an envelope of birch bark, and which she is obliged for some years afterwards to carry on her back! She is now considered and treated as a slave; all the laborious duties of cooking, collecting fuel, &c., devolve on her. She must obey the orders of all the women, and even of the children belonging to the village, and the slightest mistake or disobedience subjects her to the infliction of a heavy punishment. The ashes of her husband are carefully collected and deposited in a grave, which it is her duty to keep free from weeds; and should any such appear, she is obliged to root them out with her fingers! During this operation her husband's relatives stand by and beat her in cruel manner until the task is completed, or she falls a victim to their brutality. The wretched widows, to avoid this complicated cruelty, frequently commit suicide. Should she, however, linger on for three or four years, the friends of her husband agree to relieve her from her painful mourning. This is a ceremony of much consequence, and the preparations for it occupy a considerable time, generally from six to eight months. The hunters proceed to the various districts in which deer and beaver abound, and after collecting large quantities of meat and fur, return to the village. The skins are immediately bartered for guns, ammunition, clothing, trinkets, &c. Invitations are then sent to the inhabitants of the various friendly villages, and when they have all assembled the feast commences, and presents are distributed to each visitor. The object of their meeting is then explained, and the woman is brought forward, still carrying on her back the bones of her late husband, which are now removed, and placed in a carved box, which is nailed or otherwise fastened to a post twelve feet high. Her conduct as a faithful widow is next highly eulogized, and the ceremony of her manumission is completed by one man powdering on her head the down of birds, and another pouring on it the contents of a bladder of oil! She is then at liberty to marry again, or lead a life of single blessedness; but few of them I believe wish to encounter the risk of attending a second widowhood.

The men are condemned to a similar ordeal, but they do not bear it with equal fortitude; and numbers fly to distant quarters to avoid the brutal treatment which custom has established as a kind of religious rite.

Sources

[#46] Talkotin: Ross Cox, *The Columbia River, Or scenes and adventures during a residence of six years on the western side of the Rocky Mountains among various tribes of Indians hitherto unknown*. Edgar I. Stewart and Jane R. Stewart, eds., Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957, pp. 380–382, attributed to Duncan M'Gillivray, Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray 1794–95, ed. Arthur S. Morton. Toronto: Macmillan, 1929.

TLINGIT

[#47] Holding Others Responsible for Suicide
(Aurel Krause, 1881–82; 1956)

Lütke declares that suicide is unknown among the Tlinglit. He says that there is not even an instance of a slave taking his life. According to our findings, suicide is not such an unknown act. An injured person who has no possibility of revenge, or someone who is pursued and sees no

way out, takes his life with the thought that he is thereby injuring his enemies, for the person who drives another to suicide will still be held responsible by the dead man's friends and relatives, just as though he had killed him outright. A woman was accused by a shaman of the Stikine of causing the illness of another woman by witchcraft, and the relatives of the latter faced her with this accusation. This upset the accused woman so that she seized a knife and cut her throat. As a result the shaman, as well as the relatives of the sick woman who brought the accusation, were besieged by the relatives of the dead woman in their homes until they acknowledged their guilt. A way of seeking death by those who wish to end their lives is to commit themselves to the sea in a canoe without paddles. The story goes that a Chilkat Indian who was badly scratched up in a fight with his wife, through shame and anger, left without a word to commit suicide after spending the night sitting in the trader's house. However, this time it went no further than the attempt. After dark the following evening the supposed dead man returned and without much resistance allowed himself to be reconciled with his wife.

When in 1875 a Stikine chief, Fernandeste by name, committed suicide while he was being taken to Portland for a hearing because he became depressed on account of his circumstances, according to the report, his relatives demanded compensation of General Howard, claiming that the other Indians called them cowards because they had not taken revenge for his death. To pacify the Stikine, Howard gave them 100 blankets and delivered the body of Fernandeste.

Source

[#47] Aurel Krause, *The Tlingit Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1956, pp. 155, 281.

[#48] Slaves: An Honor to Die at the Master's Funeral
(Albert F. Niblack, 1887)

The custom with regard to slaves that died a natural death was to throw the bodies into the sea or otherwise cast them aside. Certain slaves, however, were selected by a master to be killed or sacrificed at his funeral ceremonies, in order that their spirits might accompany his in the next world and minister to it as they did to him in life. Those so selected esteemed it a great honor, as their bodies were accorded the same sepulture as their master's. In case of cremation the bodies of the slaves were cremated with that of their master, or in case of interment were buried with it, thus securing to their spirits a comfortable time in the next world. Slaves killed on the occasion of a person of consequence building a house or giving a great feast were accorded also the right of burial of a freeman. There is, therefore, no special form of sepulture for slaves.

Source

[#48] Albert F. Niblack, *The Coast Indians of Southern Alaska and Northern British Columbia: Based on the Collections in the U. S. National Museum, and on the Personal Observation of the Writer in Connection with the Survey of Alaska in the Seasons of 1885, 1886, and 1887*. New York and London: Johnson Reprint Co. Ltd., 1970, p. 356.

[#49] Paying Damages for Suicide
(Livingston F. Jones, 1893–1914)

If a man commits suicide, a cause is always sought, and he who is regarded responsible for the cause is blamed and his tribe made to pay damages. . . .

A man committed suicide simply to make trouble for one who offended him. According to native custom, if a person commits suicide because someone has offended him, or opposed a wish of his, heavy damages or a life must be given to the tribe of the suicide by the tribe of the one giving the offense. So suicide is sometimes resorted to in order to harass and burden others. The threat of suicide is sometimes used as a bluff to get one's way.

Source

[#49] Livingston F. Jones, *A Study of the Thlingets of Alaska*. New York: Fleming Revell, 1914, pp. 195, 218.

KASKA

[#50] Suicide and Intoxication
(John Joseph Honigmann, 1943–45)

All evidence agrees that completed suicide is very rare in Kaska society. On the other hand, observations and communications agree that attempted suicide by men is of frequent occurrence and very likely to appear during intoxication. There is a general pattern for such attempted self-destruction. In the two cases of the sort observed during field work, the weapon selected was a rifle. As he brandishes the weapon the would-be suicide announces his intention in an emotional outburst. This becomes the signal for interference to block the deed. One or more men leap forward to wrest the gun from the intended suicide's possession and toss it out of sight. The would-be victim is now usually emotionally overwhelmed by his behavior. This pattern is illustrated by Louis Maza's behavior during intoxication. Several times during the afternoon, Louis had manifested aggression toward himself, crying: "I don't care if I'm killed. I don't care my life." After several hours of such emotional outbursts interspersed with quarreling and aggression toward his companions, he seized his large caliber rifle and threatened to kill himself. Old Man threw himself on the gun and as the two men grappled for the weapon, Louis succeeded in firing one wild shot. John Kean and the ethnographer ran to the camp and together wrenched the gun from the drunken man. John fired the shells in the chamber and Old Man tossed the gun half-way down the cutbank. No punishment or other discrimination is reserved for attempted suicides. The individual is comforted and in the future, while intoxicated, he is watched lest he repeat the attempt.

The dynamics of attempted suicide in Kaska society are extremely interesting, their interpretation contributing much to our understanding of deference. The goal of deference has been defined as warm human relations; from the psychiatric standpoint this is equivalent to saying that the goal of deference is love. Consciously, it must be made clear, the Kaska does not so much want to be liked as not to be disliked. The significance of this statement will be further clarified in connection with emotional isolation. Kaska individuals are afraid of giving offense and arousing hostility in a wide circle of human relationships, because they are anxious lest they be disliked. Evidence comes from the fact that people are readily hurt or offended. Thus, Nitla's fear that his father-in-law would hear a false story about how he had neglected Adele led to his desire to tell his wife's father his side of the story so that the latter would not dislike him. Old Man once expressed a complaint that Louis Maza was receiving visitors from downriver, but that nobody was

continuing upriver to his place. Visitors are an assurance of popularity, so that a lack of them suggests being disliked. Unquestionably an attitude which fears dislike equals an unconscious fear of the loss of love plus the desire for love. It is against this theoretical backdrop that we may understand the significance of attempted suicide following a sequence of hostile and uncontrolled behavior. By his aggressive behavior the intoxicated individual violates personal standards of deference, betrays hostility, and earns the loss of love. Guilt follows and, while intoxication continues to reduce the efficiency of the egocentric defenses, he reacts to this guilt by a sudden reversal of activity. Aggression and hostility are deflected toward the self and this reversal leads to such behavior as Edward Prince manifested just before he attempted suicide, complaining that he was all alone in the world without relatives; or else the individual announces his intention of self-destruction. The function of this announcement is clear. It is a plea for help and a defense guaranteeing that the attempt will be unsuccessful. People immediately rush to stop the suicide. This is the would-be victim's pay-off. In the attention he receives, he is assured of the affectionate regard which a moment ago he so strongly doubted. By this time the attempt is a thing of the past. The gun has been safely thrown away, the anxiety of loss of love and assurances of love pile up in the catharsis of emotion that typically terminates a sequence of hostility. From now on defenses can once more restore the emotional isolation of the personality which alcohol tore down. While all self-pity in intoxication is expressive of an unconscious demand for love, not all such emotional expression is immediately determined by aggression released during intoxication. It may also be a result of the affect hunger which the individual feels more keenly while his defenses have been reduced by alcohol. Some reported episodes of psychotic behavior may also be regarded as representing a disintegration of deference and the exposure of the individual to the excitement of hostile impulses which he can no longer control.

. . . People who committed suicide also ended up in a distinctive realm but no informant could describe this beyond the fact that it was "a black place" and an abode of the "devil." Suicide, usually by hanging, might follow a period of extreme anger or a bitter quarrel.

Sources

[#50] Kaska: John Joseph Honigmann, *Culture and Ethos of Kaska Society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1949, pp. 204, 269; and J. J. Honigman, *The Kaska Indians*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954, p. 137.

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DAIDOJI YUZAN (1639–1730)

from Beginner's Book of Bushido (expanded in Archive)

Daidoji Yuzan Shigesuke was born to a distinguished Japanese samurai family, said to be descended from the powerful 12th-century Taira clan, though the family name—Daidoji—had been taken several centuries later. Daidoji arrived in Edo (now Tokyo) as a young man and studied military science with two of the mid-17th century's greatest tacticians; he was also an orthodox Confucian scholar. He later traveled around the country, teaching and testing himself; he became a prominent writer and an expert in the military arts. Daidoji lived under the rule of six different Shoguns, from Iyemitsu to Yoshimuné, and died at the age of 92.

The 17th century saw the decline of Japan's long history of internal warfare during the Warring States period, warfare that was fought among a warrior class, the samurai or bushi, *who were educated in both the martial arts and literature. The country had been unified around 1600 under the Tokugawa Shogunate, which would rule until 1868. The new peace made prosperity possible and encouraged the rise of a merchant class, but this threatened the significance and existence of the warrior class, and large numbers of samurai who had been attached to feudal lords became* ronin, *or masterless and unemployed.* Bushido, *"the Way of the Warrior," Japan's traditional code of military culture and chivalry, was thus under threat. It is in this climate that Daidoji's* Budoshoshinshu, *or* Beginner's Book of Bushido, *was written. The* Beginner's Book, *a textbook for young samurai, takes the point of view of the retainer, rather than the lord; in this, it is unlike many other accounts of late 16th- and early 17th-century military culture (e.g., that of Sorai), but it does have much in common with the somewhat later, better-known* Hagakure, *a collection of 1,300 anecdotes and reflections dictated by a samurai who, restrained by the prohibition of* junshi, *had become a hermit priest after the death of his lord. Daidoji's treatment of samurai culture is particularly concerned with the philosophical dilemma of how the warrior is to live in a time of peace.*

Traditionally, Bushido *had set the standard for the behavior, character, and duties of the warrior class, and included expectations concerning politeness, sincerity, self-control, honor, dignity, and absolute loyalty to one's lord. Its roots were to be found in Confucian concepts of loyalty, as well as Buddhist ideas of the nonexistence of the self, the impermanence of life, and the importance of equanimity or preparedness of mind. From the time of the early Heian period (8th–12th centuries), the code of* Bushido *had taken honor as central and had held that to protect it, the samurai warrior was, among other things, to be prepared to commit suicide. Wounded or defeated warriors were expected to kill themselves; to be taken alive as a prisoner was a great dishonor. The late medieval epic* Taiheiki *recounts 68 separate occasions of warrior suicide involving a total of 2,140 men.*

Whether on the battlefield or in court, the suicide was to take place by means of self-disembowelment, at least when advance preparation for the ritual was possible. Known in Japanese as seppuku, *this practice is often termed* hara-kiri, *a Western construction formed from the Japanese terms for "belly" and "cut"; the practice may have evolved in the light of the traditional*

Japanese belief that the abdomen, hara, *is the seat of the soul and the affections. The first recorded case of* seppuku *is said to have been the death of the archer Minamoto Tametomo in 1170.* Seppuku *could be an expression of loyalty on the death of one's lord, known as* junshi*; it could serve to avoid capture in war; it could be used to force an errant lord to act in accord with the correct moral order; and it could be exacted as a penalty for certain transgressions, a form of capital punishment [q.v., under A. B. Mitford].* Seppuku *is distinct from the other principal form of suicide recognized in traditional Japanese culture,* shinju*, or "love suicide" [q.v., under Chikamatsu]. Performed as an act of military honor, ritual disembowelment in* seppuku *was seen as a privilege reserved for samurai warriors. Commoners, women, noblemen, priests, and peasants were neither expected nor permitted to perform* seppuku*, though* bushi *women, who often followed their husbands in death, carried a knife and were instructed from girlhood in how to sever the jugular vein.* Seppuku *has sometimes been compared to the Roman custom in which a defeated general falls on his sword, though apparently more strongly expected and frequently practiced. One modern commentator notes that "the samurai tradition of suicide to save one's honour may have lost Japan many fine generals who would otherwise have lived to fight another day." Another comments on the centrality of* seppuku *in Japanese culture: "Western civilization gravitated around the Supreme Being; that of feudal Japan around the Supreme Act."*

By Daidoji's time, however, the practice of ritual disembowelment was increasingly seen as a relic of times past. In 1663, when Daidoji was in his mid-20s, the Japanese government, the Tokugawa Bakufu*, had prohibited the practice of* junshi*, committing* seppuku *at the death of one's lord. In the* Beginner's Book*, Daidoji struggled to show young samurai what would be required of them in this new era, committed as he was to the traditional code of* Bushido*, a struggle particularly evident at the end of the selection in his effort to characterize "great loyalty that surpasses* junshi*."*

Sources

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from THE BEGINNER'S BOOK OF BUSHIDO

One who is a samurai must before all things keep constantly in mind, by day and by night from the morning when he takes up his chop-sticks to eat his New Year Breakfast to Old Year's night when he pays his yearly bills, the fact that he has to die. That is his chief business. If he is always mindful of this he will be able to live in accordance with the paths of Loyalty and Filial

Duty, will avoid myriads of evils and adversities, keep himself free from disease and calamity and moreover enjoy a long life. He will also be a fine personality with many admirable qualities. For existence is impermanent as the dew of evening and the hoar-frost of morning, and particularly uncertain is the life of the warrior, and if he thinks he can console himself with the idea of eternal service to his lord or unending devotion to his relatives, something may well happen to make him neglect his duty to his lord and forget what he owes to his family. But if he determines simply to live for today and take no thought for the morrow, so that when he stands before his lord to receive his commands he thinks of it as his last appearance and when he looks on the faces of his relatives he feels that he will never see them again, then will his duty and regard for both of them be completely sincere and his mind be in accord with the path of loyalty and filial duty.

But if he does not keep death in mind he will be careless and liable to be indiscreet and say things that offend others and an argument ensues, and though, if no notice taken, it may be settled, if there is a rebuke, it may end in a quarrel. Then if he goes strolling about pleasure resorts and seeing the sights in crowded places without any proper reserve he may come up against some big fool and get into a quarrel before he knows it, and may even be killed and his lord's name brought to it and his parents and relations exposed to reproach.

And all this misfortune springs from his not remembering to keep death always in his thoughts. But one who does this whether he is speaking himself or answering others will carefully consider, as befits a samurai, every word he says and never launch out into useless argument. Neither will he allow anyone to entice him into unsuitable places where he may be suddenly confronted with an awkward situation, and thus he avoids all evils and calamities. And both high and low, if they forget about death, are very apt to take to unhealthy excess in food and wine and women so that they die unexpectedly early from diseases of the kidneys and spleen, and even while they live their illness makes them of no use to anyone. But those who keep death always before their eyes are strong and healthy while young, and as they take care of their health and are moderate in eating and drinking and avoid the paths of women, being abstemious and moderate in all things, they remain free from disease and live a long and healthy life.

Then one who lives long in this world may develop all sorts of desires and his covetousness may increase so that he wants what belongs to others and cannot bear to part with what is his own, becoming in fact just like a mere tradesman. But if he is always looking death in the face, a man will have little attachment to material things and will not exhibit these grasping and covetous qualities, and will become as I said before, a fine character. . . .And all this is for the instruction of the youthful samurai. . . .

The Latter End

The samurai whether great or small, high or low, has to set before all other things the consideration of how to meet his inevitable end. However clever or capable or efficient he may have been, if he is upset and wanting in composure and so makes a poor showing when he comes to face it all, his previous good deeds will be like water and all decent people will despise him so that he will be covered with shame.

For when a samurai goes out to battle and does valiant and splendid exploits and makes a great name, it is only because he made up his mind to die. And if unfortunately he gets the worst of it and he and his head have to part company, when his opponent asks for his name he must

declare it at once loudly and clearly and yield up his head with a smile on his lips and without the slightest sign of fear. Or should he be so badly wounded that no surgeon can do anything for him, if he is still conscious, the proper procedure for a samurai is to answer the enquiries of his superior officers and comrades and inform them of the manner of his being wounded and then to make an end without more ado.

Similarly in times of peace the steadfast samurai, particularly if he is old but no less if he is young and stricken with some serious disease, ought to show firmness and resolution and attach no importance to leaving this life. Naturally if he is in high office, but also however low his position may be, while he can speak he should request the presence of his official superior and inform him that as he has long enjoyed his consideration and favour he has consequently wished fervently to do all in his power to carry out his duties, but unfortunately he has now been attacked by this serious disease from which it is difficult to recover, and consequently is unable to do so; and that as he is about to pass away he wishes to express his gratitude for past kindness and trusts to be remembered respectfully to the Councillors of the clan. This done, he should say farewell to his family and friends and explain to them that it is not the business of a samurai to die of illness after being the recipient of the great favours of his lord for so many years, but unfortunately in his case it is unavoidable. . . . Such is the leave-taking of a true samurai.

. . . One who values the samurai ideal should see to it that he knows how to die properly of illness on the mats.

Loyal to Death

A samurai in service is under a great debt to his lord and may think that he can hardly repay it except by committing "*junshi*" and following him in death. But that is not permitted by law, and just to perform the ordinary service at home on the mats is far from desirable. What then is left? A man may wish for an opportunity to do something more outstanding than his comrades to throw away his life and accomplish something, and if he resolutely makes up his mind to do something of this sort it is a hundred times preferable to performing *junshi*. For so he may become the saviour, not only of his lord but of all his fellow retainers both small and great, and thus become a personage who will be remembered to the end of time as a model samurai possessing the three qualities of loyalty, faith and valour. Now there is always an evil spirit that haunts the family of a person of rank. And the way he curses that family is in the first place by causing the death by accident or epidemic disease of some young samurai among the hereditary councillors or elders who has the three virtues of a warrior and who promises to be of great value in the future as a support to his lord, as well as a benefit to all the clan, and whose loss is therefore a severe blow. . . . In the second place this evil spirit will enter into the person of one of the Councillors or Elders or samurai in attendance whom the lord most trusts and favours so that he may delude the lord's mind and seduce him into the ways of injustice and immorality.

Now in thus leading his lord astray this samurai may do so in six different ways.

. . . In the sixth place, when the lord is thus addicted to pleasure, drink and dalliance, he will grow more and more wayward till his health becomes affected. All his retainers will be dispirited and lacking in sincerity, merely living from one day to the next and without any guidance from above, and eventually something may happen to the lord through the influence

of this evil spirit. And this man who is at the bottom of it all, this vengeful enemy of his master and evil genius of his house will be cursed by all the clan no doubt, but even so there will be nothing for it but that some nine or ten of them concert together to accuse him and bring him to judgment by a war of argument without soiling their hands. But in that case the affair cannot be cleared up without making it public, and the lord and his house will be brought up for examination, and then matters may become more serious and end in sentence being passed upon them by the Shogun's government. And in all ages when a daimyo has been unable to manage his affairs and has been disciplined by the government the result has been that his house has come to an end. As the proverb has it, 'when you straighten the horn you kill the ox, and when you hunt the rats you burn the shrine,' so when the lord's house is ruined, his retainers are discharged and lose their livelihood. Therefore it is best to seize this great rascal of a councillor who is the evil spirit of the house and either stab him through or cut off his head whichever you prefer, and so put an end to him and his corrupt practices. And then you must straightway commit *seppuku* yourself. Thus there will be no open breach or lawsuit or sentence and your lord's person will not be attainted, so that the whole clan will continue to live in security and there will be no open trouble in the Empire. And one who acts thus is a model samurai who does a deed a hundred-fold better than *junshi*, for he has the three qualities of loyalty and faith and valour, and will hand down a glorious name to posterity.

INCREASE MATHER (1639–1723)

A Call to the Tempted: A Sermon on the Horrid Crime of Self-Murder (expanded in Archive)

Increase Mather, commonly considered the most gifted member of the prominent Mather family and the first to be born in America, was a religious, educational, and political leader of early Puritan New England. A graduate of Harvard and Trinity College, Dublin, Mather was a skilled writer and orator who delivered sermons to congregations throughout England and New England. He was elected acting president of Harvard in 1685, later rector and president, but was forced to resign by political rivals in 1701 on a technicality. Mather wrote many religious treatises, political pamphlets, and sermons, as well as A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians *(1676). A conflicted critic of the Salem witch trials like his son Cotton Mather [q.v.], Increase Mather's* Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits *(1693) and its critique of spectral evidence is credited with stemming the tide of witchcraft executions.*

Increase Mather's sermon, A Call to the Tempted: A Sermon on the Horrid Crime of Self-Murder *(1682, published 1723), is a passionate and reasoned attack on suicide, addressed directly to those who might be tempted—as Mather believed, by the devil—to commit it. The text*

was put into pamphlet form from his notes 40 years after its oral delivery, and its cover advertises the sermon's objective: "for a Charitable Stop to Suicides."

Although Mather had often thought of preaching on the subject, the final motivation for the sermon came as he walked alone in his garden: "This day my former thought about preaching on the evil of self-murder, returning upon me again. I looked up to GOD, and as I was lifting up my heart to Him . . . I was strangely moved and melted. Tears gushed from my eyes. And it seemed as if it were said unto me, 'Preach on that subject, and thou shalt save bodies and souls from death.'" The following Sunday, Mather preached a sermon based on Acts 16:27–28 in which he outlined the reasons why such an act is unacceptable.

For Mather, suicide is often the act of trying to escape suffering through sin. The sin lies in hating one's own flesh—the flesh that was created in God's image—and in forfeiting the grace of life, as well as in murdering the one person to whom we are closest, that is, ourselves (murder perpetrated on one's mother or brother, for Mather, is worse than one committed on a stranger). Mather's view presupposes the doctrine of election, but even though a person might be tempted to suicide by despair over the belief that he or she is already damned—the sermon is particularly addressed to those who see themselves as sinners—Mather holds out some hope: "Thou are not sure that thou shalt not be saved." Even though Mather hints that God is merciful and will not necessarily condemn all who commit suicide, on a practical level, one should never pardon any self-murderer, since a charitable view of suicide will only serve to encourage the practice: "Lest by being over-charitable to the dead, we become cruel to the living."

Source

Increase Mather, *A Call to the Tempted: A Sermon on the Horrid Crime of Self-Murder* [dated Boston, May 23, 1682], printed by B. Green, sold by Samuel Gerrish, 1723–24 (spelling and grammar modernized).

from A CALL TO THE TEMPTED: A SERMON ON THE HORRID CRIME OF SELF-MURDER

Do Thyself No Harm

Acts 16: 27, 28

"He would have killed himself;—but Paul cried with a loud voice, DO THYSELF NO HARM."

In the context, the Evangelist gives an account concerning the imprisonment of *Paul* and *Silas* for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and a most remarkable occurrence happening thereupon which proved the *conversion* of the *jailer* who had dealt very cruelly with them. . . . It was brought to pass by means of a *miraculous earthquake* which happened at *midnight*. The *jailer* being, by this *earthquake*, frightfully waked out of sleep, was full of distress and consternation. While he was thus distressed in his mind, the *devil* took advantage to fall upon him with horrid temptations.

Two things are noted in the words before us. *First*, there is noted the *evil* which the *jailer* was tempted unto, to wit, self-murder. He *drew his sword*, and was just ready to sheath it in his own wretched bowels. *Secondly*, there is noted that which was the happy means of diverting him from the *evil*; to wit, the apostles *speaking* to him. *He cried with a loud voice, very earnestly*. And it was time to be in *earnest*. It was a *matter of life and death!*

Indeed, he used the most effectual argument that could be, to dissuade him from persisting in his attempt of self-murder. He convinced him, that the *temptation* which hurried him on to the barbarous and bloody fact, by him defined, was a mere *needless fear*. He was afraid, the prisoners were gone, and therefore the magistrates who committed them to prison would put him to death for letting them escape. Therefore *Paul* says, *We are all here. . . .* However, he was distressed with a *causeless fear*. And yet this distress did, through the *instigation of Satan*, prevail so far that he was just upon the point of *making himself away*. Such is the subtlety of *Satan* and his great power over the minds of men, when God shall see meet to let him loose, so that he can, from mere *imaginary fears*, put them upon no less an evil than *self-destruction*. It was with the *jailer* so, and the *temptation* had prevailed, if *Paul* had not earnestly cautioned him from hearkening to it.

Doctrine

Question 1. The *distresses* and *temptations* that often put men upon the sin of self-murder: *What are they?*

I. Sometimes men are *tempted* unto this evil, so that they may not fall into the hands of those that they think will put them to a *miserable death*. This was the *temptation* of the *jailer* now before us. According to the law among the *Romans*, if the *jailer* let his *prisoner* go he was to suffer the same punishment which the *prisoner* should have undergone. . . . Sinful creatures think with themselves that if they live a while longer, they shall be put to a more *miserable death*, and therefore it may be said of them, *sin hast thou chose rather than affliction!* They will destroy *themselves*, rather than stay for *other men* to do it. . . .

II. The *fear of disgrace* in the world puts men upon it. There was this also in the *temptation* of the *jailer*. He thought it a *disgraceful* thing to be put to death in a way of judicial proceeding and with a public execution. . . . Sometimes a *proud Spirit* had rather commit the *greatest sin* against God than undergo a *little disgrace* from men. . . .

III. *Distress of conscience* is that from which the *devil* does many times, take occasion to *tempt* men unto the sin of self-murder. *Saul* was in *distress of conscience* as well as otherwise distressed, and therein he would have *starved himself to death. . . . Judas* is in *distress of conscience*, and *then*!—He flies to the *halter* that he may let out his wretched soul. The burden of a guilty and a wounded *conscience* is intolerable. It is said, Prov. 18: 14. *Who can bear it?* Poor creatures having such a *wounded spirit*, and being under the *strong delusions of Satan*, often think to obtain some ease by ruining of themselves. Especially when *inward & outward* troubles meet together. . . .

Question 2. For what *reasons* are they that are so *tempted*, earnestly cautioned against complying with the *temptation?*

I. Temptations to self-murder, Satan is in them! Such *temptations* are not from the holy and blessed God. *Let no man say, when he is thus tempted, I am tempted of God!—Job's* wife

tempted him to commit such a sin as would bring a quick death upon himself. *Curse God and die*! She was an instrument of *Satan*. It was the *devil* that put her upon giving that *cursed* and *bloody* counsel to her husband. . . .

II. Self-murder is a very *great sin*. *Murder* is the greatest sin against the *second table* of the Law. Tis a great provocation in the sight of God. Hence is that expression in the scripture, concerning a most abominable thing.—Isa. 66: 3. *It is as if he killed a man*. . . . But self-murder is the worst kind of *murder*.—Tis the most *unnatural*!—For a man to *murder* a near *relative* tis worse than for him to *murder* another. And the *nearer* the *relation* is, the greater the sin.—Therefore,—tis a most *complicated sin?*

The self-murderer sins against the glorious God in defacing of his *image*, and in dishonoring of His *name*. . . .

He sins against *himself*,—against his own *body*, as if *hating his own flesh*.—And it may be said unto him, *Thou hast sinned against thy own soul*. His *reputation* also, is forever destroyed.

He sins against his *relatives* to whom he causes the greatest *grief*, and the greatest *dishonor*, that can be.—

III. A willful and impenitent self-murderer *cannot be saved!* We are taught, 1 John 3: 15. *Ye know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him*. . . .

[I]t is a clear *scriptural principle*, that an *impenitent murderer cannot be saved*. . . .

IV. *. . . Life in this world, is an invaluable mercy: because whilst there is life there is hope: Eccl 9: 4. To him who is joined unto all the living there is hope. As long as persons are alive, there is an hopeful possibility that they may repent and turn and live unto God . . . [b]ut when life is at an end, there is no hope of repentance or of getting a part of Christ, or of getting sin to be forgiven*. . . .

Use I. We may here take notice of the *folly* & *unreasonableness* of those *temptations*, whereby sinful creatures are sometimes put upon *self-destruction*.—that *fear of disgrace* in the world. . . . A man cannot more *disgrace himself* than by committing such a sin. He leaves an everlasting *blot* upon his name. . . . Is it not *folly* for men to bring upon themselves an *eternal shame* and *confusion world without end*, that they may escape a *temporal*!

***

There is another poor creature thus tempted of the devil. I am a reprobate, and I am sure I shall not be saved and therefore, if I destroy myself, I shall have less punishment in Hell than if I lived longer in the world. I answer; thou canst not know thy reprobation. It is not god, but Satan, who tells thee, that thou art a reprobate. Thou art not sure that thou shalt not be saved. . . . Be it how it will with thee, do thyself no harm: Thou may for ought any one can say, yet be saved forever. . . .

It may be said, *I will repent and pray for the pardon of my sin before I do it*. I answer, what a *delusion* of *Satan*! I have read indeed of a philosopher who called upon his gods, and so *threw himself into the fire* to his own destruction. But canst thou think, that God will hear such prayers'? . . . *When you make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood*. Nor can this be called *repentance*: For a man to *confess* a sin and be resolved still upon the *commission* of it! . . .

CHIKAMATSU MONZAEMON (1653–1725)

from *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*

Chikamatsu Monzaemon, born Sugimori Nobumori, the second son of a minor samurai family, is recognized as the first modern Japanese dramatist. Often called "the Japanese Shakespeare," he is widely considered the most important playwright of the Tokugawa age. As a boy, Chikamatsu served as a page to a noble family at a time when the nobility were patrons of the puppet theatre, and his earliest signed dramatic work was the puppet play The Soga Successors. *Although of samurai background, he wrote for the* chonin, *or townspeople. Between 1684 and 1705, Chikamatsu wrote Kabuki plays, many in collaboration with the outstanding actor of the time, Sakata Tojuro. For the last 20 years of his life, Chikamatsu returned to writing for the puppet theatre—dissatisfied, some have claimed, with the liberties that temperamental actors took with his texts, and preferring the more obedient puppets.*

Chikamatsu composed over 150 plays, including The Oil Hell, The Punishment of Heaven, The Battles of Coxinga, *and the hugely successful puppet play from which the selection is taken,* The Love Suicides at Sonezaki *(1703). The plays were of two main types:* jidaimono, *period plays treating the heroes of the distant or recent past, and domestic dramas,* sewamono, *portraying the ordinary people of his own day.*

The Love Suicides at Sonezaki, *which determined Chikamatsu's future career, was his first attempt to use themes from daily life. The play was inspired by a double suicide that occurred at the Sonezaki Shrine in 1703. In the play, a pair of lovers—a clerk in an oil shop, Tokubei, and a courtesan named Ohatsu—kill themselves after they are tricked out of dowry money Tokubei must return after refusing to marry the girl chosen for him by his uncle. The lovers are both in their unlucky years (in the yin-yang system, a man's 25th, 42nd, and 60th years are dangerous; for a woman, her 19th and 33rd years), and Tokubei is now 25 and Ohatsu is 19. They see their love suicide,* shinju, *as their only hope of lasting union.*

Shinju—*meaning "sincerity of heart"—refers to double or multiple suicides, whether pairs of lovers, mothers and children, or entire families. It is sometimes called "companionate" or "companionship" suicide. Like the suicide of loyalty to one's master,* junshi, *and the suicide of honor,* seppuku *(portrayed in Daidoji Yuzan's* Beginner's Book of Bushido *[q.v.]),* shinju—*particularly in the form of the "love suicide"—forms a recognizable tradition within Japanese culture.*

The final stanzas of The Love Suicides at Sonezaki *include a chant,"*Namu Amida. Namu Amida. Namu Amida Butsu," *invoking Amitabha Buddha, the principal deity of the Jodo Shu and Jodo Shinsu sects of Buddhism. These sects, also known as Pure Land Buddhism, emphasize the perfect bliss of a future existence and, by implication, the relative unimportance of earthly existence. The* Namu Amida *chant, like the text itself, expresses the lovers' faith in rebirth in the Western Paradise (called Jodo or "Pure Land"), where, according to the tradition of popular Buddhism derived from the* Lotus Sutra *[q.v.], lovers who died together would be reborn on the same lotus calyx in the lake before Amida's throne.*

Chikamatsu composed the play extremely quickly, and it was already being performed at the Takemoto Theater only a month after the original suicides. The third scene of the play (it is not divided into acts) is one of the most celebrated dramatic pieces in Japanese literature, setting the standard for

an entire genre of dramatic works centered on love suicides, a genre to which Chikamatsu himself contributed several further works, including The Love Suicides at Amijima *and* The Love Suicides in the Women's Temple. *Chikamatsu's plays are said to have contributed to a vogue for love suicides, both on the stage and in real life, which continued until 1722, when the government for a time banned plays with the word for love suicide,* shinju, *in the title. Though discouraged in contemporary society,* shinju *has remained a familiar institution within Japanese culture.*

Source

Chikamatsu Monzaemon, *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, Scene III. From Donald Keene, tr., *Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 51–56.

from THE LOVE SUICIDES AT SONEZAKI

The Journey from Dōjima to the Sonezaki Shrine.

NARRATOR: *Farewell to this world, and to the night farewell.*
We who walk the road to death, to what should we be likened?
To the frost by the road that leads to the graveyard,
Vanishing with each step we take ahead:
How sad is the dream of the dream!

TOKUBEI: *Ah, did you count the bell? Of the seven strokes*
That mark the dawn, six have sounded.
The remaining one will be the last echo
We shall hear in this life.

OHATSU: *It will echo the bliss of nirvana.*

NARRATOR: *Farewell, and not to the bell alone—*
They look a last time on the grass, the trees, the sky.
The clouds, the river go by unmindful of them;
The Dipper's bright reflection shines in the water.

TOKUBEI: *Let's pretend that Umeda Bridge*
Is the bridge the magpies built
Across the Milky Way, and make a vow
To be husband and wife stars for eternity.

OHATSU: *I promise. I'll be your wife forever.*

NARRATOR: *They cling together—the river waters*
Will surely swell with the tears they shed.
Across the river, in a teahouse upstairs,
Some revelers, still not gone to bed,
Are loudly talking under blazing lamps—

No doubt gossiping about the good or bad
Of this years crop of lovers' suicides;
Their hearts sink to hear these voices.

TOKUBEI: *How Strange! But yesterday, even today,*
We spoke as if such things did not concern us.
Tomorrow we shall figure in their gossip.
If the world will sing about us, let it sing.

NARRATOR: *This is the song that now they hear.*
"I'm sure you'll never have me for your wife,
I know my love means nothing to you . . ."
Yes, for all our love, for all our grieving,
Our lives, our lots, have not been as we wished.
Never, until this very day, have we known
A single night of heart's relaxation—
Instead, the tortures of an ill-starred love.
"What is this bond between us?
I cannot forget you.
But you would shake me off and go—
I'll never let you!
Kill me with your hands, than go.
I'll never release you!"
So she said in tears.

OHATSU: *Of all the many songs, that one, tonight!*

TOKUBEI: *Who is it singing? We who listen*

BOTH: *Suffer the ordeal of those before us.*

NARRATOR: *They cling to each other, weeping bitterly.*
Any other night would not matter
If tonight were only a little longer,
But the heartless summer night, as is its wont,
Breaks as cockcrows hasten their last hour.

TOKUBEI: *It will be worse if we wait for dawn.*
Let us die in the wood of Tenjin.

NARRATOR: *He leads her by the hand.*
At Umeda Embankment, the night ravens.

TOKUBEI: *Tomorrow our bodies may be their meal.*

OHATSU: *It's strange, this is your unlucky year*
Of twenty-five, and mine of nineteen.
It's surely proof how deep are our ties
That we who love each other are cursed alike.
All the prayers I have made for this world
To the gods and to the Buddha, I here and now
Direct to the future: in the world to come
May we be reborn on the same lotus!

NARRATOR: *One hundred eight the beads her fingers tell*
On her rosary; tears increase the sum.
No end to her grief, but the road has an end:
Their minds are numbed, the sky is dark, the wind still,
They have reached the thick wood of Sonezaki.

Shall it be here, shall it be there? When they brush the grass, the falling dew vanishes even quicker than their lives, in this uncertain world a lightning flash—or was it something else?

OHATSU: I'm afraid. What was that now?

TOKUBEI: That was a human spirit. I thought we alone would die tonight, but someone else has preceded us. Whoever it may be, we'll have a companion on the journey to the Mountain of Death. *Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu.*

NARRATOR: She weeps helplessly.

OHATSU: To think that others are dying tonight too! How heart-breaking!

NARRATOR: Man though he is, his tears fall freely.

TOKUBEI: Those two spirits flying together—do you suppose they belong to anyone else? They must be yours and mine!

OHATSU: Those Two Spirits? Then, are we dead already?

TOKUBEI: Normally, if we saw a spirit, we'd knot our clothes and murmur prayers to keep our souls with us, but now we hurry towards our end, hoping instead our two souls will find the same dwelling. Do not mistake the way, do not lose me!

NARRATOR: They embrace, flesh to flesh, than fall to the ground and weep—how pitiful they are! Their strings of tears unite like entwining branches, or the pine and palm that grow from a single trunk, a symbol of eternal love. Here the dew of their unhappy lives will at last settle.

TOKUBEI: Let this be the spot.

NARRATOR: He unfastens the sash of his cloak. Ohatsu removes her tear-stained outer robe, and throws it on the palm tree; the fronds might now serve as a broom to sweep away the sad world's dust.

Ohatsu takes a razor from her sleeve.

OHATSU: I had this razor prepared in case we were overtaken on the way and separated. I was determined not to forfeit our name as lovers. How happy I am that we are to die together as we hoped!

TOKUBEI: How wonderful of you to have thought of that! I am so confident in our love that I have no fears even about death. And yet it would be unfortunate if because of the pain we are to suffer people said that we looked ugly in death. Let us secure our bodies to this twin-trunked tree and die immaculately! We will become an unparalleled example of a lovers' suicide.

OHATSU: Yes, let us do that.

NARRATOR: Alas! She little thought she thus would use her light blue undersash! She draws it taut, and with her razor slashes it through.

OHATSU: The sash is cut, but you and I will never be torn apart.

NARRATOR: She sits, and he binds her twice, thrice to the tree, firmly so that she will not stir.

TOKUBEI: Is it tight?

OHATSU: Very tight.

NARRATOR: She looks at her husband, and he at her—they burst into tears.
BOTH: This is the end of our unhappy lives!
TOKUBEI: No I mustn't give way to grief.
NARRATOR: He lifts his head and joins his hands in prayer.
TOKUBEI: My parents died when I was a boy, and I grew up thanks to the efforts of my uncle, who was my master. It disgraces me to die without repaying his kindness. Instead I shall cause him trouble which will last even after my death. Please forgive my sins.

Soon I shall see my parents in the other world. Father, Mother, welcome me there!

NARRATOR: He weeps. Ohatsu also joins her hands.
OHATSU: I envy you. You say you will meet your parents in the world of the dead. My father and mother are in this world and in good health. I wonder when I shall see them again. I heard from them this spring, but I haven't seen them since the beginning of last autumn. Tomorrow, when word reaches the village of our suicides, how unhappy they will be! Now I must bid farewell for this life to my parents, my brothers and sisters. If at least my thoughts can reach you, please appear before me, if only in dreams. Dear Mother, beloved Father!
NARRATOR: She sobs and wails aloud. Her husband also cries out and sheds incessant tears in all too understandable emotion.
OHATSU: We could talk forever, but it serves no purpose. Kill me, kill me quickly!
NARRATOR: She hastens the moment of death.
TOKUBEI: I'm ready.
NARRATOR: He swiftly draws his dagger.
TOKUBEI: The moment has come. *Namu Amida. Namu Amida.*
NARRATOR: But when he tries to bring the blade against the skin of the woman he's loved, and held and slept with so many months and years, his eyes cloud over, his hand shakes. He tries to steady his weakening resolve, but still he trembles, and when he thrusts, the point misses. Twice or thrice the flashing blade deflects this way and that until a cry tells it has struck her throat.
TOKUBEI: *Namu Amida. Namu Amida. Namu Amida Butsu.*
NARRATOR: He twists the blade deeper and deeper, but the strength has left his arm. When he sees her weaken, he stretches forth his hands. The last agonies of death are indescribable.
TOKUBEI: Must I lag behind you? Let's draw our last breaths together.
NARRATOR: He thrusts and twists the razor in his throat, until it seems the handle of the blade must snap. His eyes grow dim, and his last painful breath is drawn away at its appointed hour. No one is there to tell the tale, but the wind that blows through SonezakiWood transmits it, and high and low alike gather to pray for these lovers who beyond a doubt will in the future attain Buddhahood. They have become models of true love.

JOHN ADAMS (1662–1720)

from *An Essay Concerning Self-Murther* (expanded in Archive)

Born in London, the son of a Lisbon merchant, John Adams was educated at Eton and at King's College, Cambridge, earning bachelor's, master's, and divinity degrees. He traveled to France, Italy, Spain, and Ireland. In 1687, he was appointed to the parish of Higham in Leicestershire. In London, he was lecturer of St. Clement's, rector of St. Alban, on Wood Street, and rector of St. Bartholomew. He was also made prebendary of Canterbury, and in 1708, became canon of Windsor. He served as chaplain to William III and also to Queen Anne. In 1712, he was elected provost of King's College, a post that he held until his death.

Adams was recognized as an eloquent preacher and accomplished linguist, and he often spoke on public occasions. At least 15 of his sermons were published during his life. The selection here is taken from An Essay Concerning Self-Murther *(1700). Here, Adams bases his argument against self-murder, or suicide, on obligations and duties persons have as members of civil society. For if suicide were condoned and the proper authority given to those who would take their own lives, it must be universally so; and that, to Adams, would cause a severe weakening of civil society. Further, Adams also considers the difference between putting oneself at great risk and self-murder, concluding that only the former is justified because, if death results, it was not the intent of the act, but only a foreseen consequence. Reminiscent of Aquinas's argument that murder in self-defense is justifiable as long as it is not intended, Adams's consideration of double effect applies specifically to actions that may result in one's own death.*

Source

John Adams, *An Essay Concerning Self-Murther wherein is endeavour'd to prove that it is unlawful according to natural principles: with some considerations upon what is pretended from the said principles, by the author of a treatise intituled, Biathanatos, and others*. London: Printed for Tho. Bennet, at the Half-Moon, in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1700, pp. 23–30, 94–130, available at Early English Books Online, http://eebo.chadwyck.com, spelling modernized.

from AN ESSAY CONCERNING SELF-MURTHER

Hitherto we have considered Man as Single and Independent from Humane Laws, and showed that as he is so, Self-Murther is an Act of Injustice towards God, by destroying that which is his alone; and also both towards God and towards a Mans own self, by the positive and willful refusal of performing that end for which he received Life, and in which his happiness truly consists. Let us in the next place, for a further confirmation of the unlawfulness of this Act, consider Man as a Member of Civil Society.

And this we ought to do with the greater attention, because, though it may be convenient in some respects to consider him in the individual, and in the state of Nature, yet this is only Notional; he cannot be so as to any part of the World which we have to do withal, nor can he be so at any time but to his great Misfortune, for as 'tis necessary for his Security, that he should be under some Government, so is it likewise necessary, for the Perfection of his Nature: for his having a larger and a nobler compass for his Reason and his Virtue; there being several Virtues which cannot be exercised by Man when alone, but which owe their being to Society.

If then we consider Man in this manner, his Obligations to preserve Life are still more; both as the end of Life is enlarged, (the good of others, as well as his own being concerned in it) and as he has then less to do with his Life, (the use of it being more at others disposal) than when he was considered in the state of Nature: Because he has not then the same Authority to defend himself which he had before, but is bound in most Cases to have recourse to the Magistrate for this purpose. Besides, by enjoying the benefit of Protection in any Government, he must be supposed either tacitly or expressly to have consented in a mutual Agreement of Offence and Defense for the maintaining of the same Protection; which being chiefly for the preservation of Life, as Self-Murther must be unlawful, so it must be absurd. But that which is most considerable and sufficient of itself to prove Self-Murther to be unlawful, is, that this may prove destructive to the very Being of Society, as will appear if we consider the Reasons following.

1. Because this wholly destroys the best Measure of mutual Kindness and Justice, that which is generally confessed to be one of the chiefest and plainest Laws of Nature; namely the doing to others as we would be done to our selves: The greatest injury that can be done to another is the Murthering of him; now if a Man has the liberty to Murther himself, the measure of Justice in the most important Concerns towards others is broken. . . .

2. This would utterly destroy the force of Humane Laws; Man's having a right or power to kill himself, when he thinks fitting, would make void all Obligation to Humane Laws, as to the threats of Punishment, without a dread of which no Law would signify any thing: The greatest Punishment that Humane Laws can threaten is Death; now if Men have Authority to kill themselves, and be taught and persuaded that they have so, and be encouraged by the Examples of others, which will not be wanting, when Men are so persuaded; the threats of Death will be despised as to the disgrace or torment of it when public, because they may bring it upon themselves with ease and privacy at home, and therefore they will not be obliged to any Duty, by the fear of this, much less by the fear of any thing else; but would Rob, Ravish, Murther, &c.

3. Whatever the Reasons are, in relation to Civil Society, for which the Murther of another is forbidden; the same hold and perhaps with greater force, as to the Murthering of ones self; those Reasons are chiefly the having no Authority, the depriving the Public of a Subject, the impossibility of making any Equivalent Satisfaction. . . . Self-Murther may be a greater Crime in regard of the Public, especially if it be a public Person, than the Murthering of another Man; and if so is undoubtedly forbidden by that Law of Nature, Thou shalt not kill: otherwise that Law would be very imperfect, and reach only to the lesser Crime, and permit the greater.

Lastly, For a Man to have a right to kill himself when ever he pleases, must be destructive to Civil Government; because this Right must be Universal: One Man may exercise it as well as another; and . . . no public rule can be given to all Men to prescribe the Case exactly wherein it shall be reasonable and lawful to put this Right in Execution; every Man must be left to judge for himself, that is, to be led as his own Passions or Appetites guide him. After this rate great numbers may make themselves away, which by Example and Custom may grow still greater and greater, till the Public is weakened not only by the loss of several of its Members. . . .

Add to this the misery of the Family particularly concerned, the horrid sense which such an Act imprints upon the best Men's Minds, the general Aversion which it causes, and consequently the shame of the Relations and Acquaintance of the Self-Murtherer, and very often too the Confusion and Desolation of the forsaken Widow or Orphans; all which must be of ill Consequence to any State, especially if the Fact is frequently committed.

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. . . Self-preservation doth not so rigorously, and urgently, and illimitedly bind, but that by the Law of Nature it self, things may, yea must, neglect themselves for others. . . . [R]ectified Reason belonging only to us [humans], instructs us often to prefer public and necessary Persons, by exposing our selves to inevitable Destruction.

. . . [T]he more Reason is rectify in Man, the more he will understand to what End he received Life, and how little Authority he has to dispose of it; and therefore the more carefully will he obey the Law of Self-preservation, and this particularly upon the Consideration of what he owes the Public.

. . . [T]he Law of Self-preservation may not be willfully broken, even upon the Account of the Public. No Man has naturally any Authority to destroy himself for his Country, designedly and positively; but to hazard his Life only.

. . . [A]n honest good Man does not mind any thing but to do his Duty, to pursue faithfully the End for which Life was given; and if Life should be lost in this pursuit, this is not his desire, nor his fault; 'twas not his aim to die, but to do as he ought; nay gladly would he have lived had Life been consistent with his Virtue; but when this came in Question, both Death and Life became indifferent, and though he Chooses neither, he accepts readily of either, as they offer themselves in his way to his Duty.

. . . He that hazards Life for the Public does this in obedience to the Laws both of God and Man; he that destroys his own Life does this in disobedience to the Laws of both; the first by observing the true End of Life, does what God and Nature primarily designed as most proper to preserve Life, and if he loses it 'tis by the violence of others; the latter neglecting the true End of Life destroys it willfully by the most positive act of injustice to God, his Country and himself; the first only hazards Life, the latter chooses Death. . . .

COTTON MATHER (1663-1728)

from Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions

Cotton Mather, son of Increase Mather [q.v.], was born in Boston, graduated from Harvard in 1678, and was ordained in 1685 in the Congregational Church. He assisted and then succeeded his father in the Second Church pastorate, Boston. Although he countenanced the Salem witchcraft trials and

executions (1692-93), he did not directly participate in them; he did however have a hand in choosing some of the Salem judges and wrote to them during the trial, urging the rejection of spectral evidence (testimony of attacks by the specters of people otherwise known to the victim) and the merciful treatment of those who confessed (his counsel in each case was rejected). Then, having tried to be a moderating influence on the trials, he damaged his own reputation by writing Wonders of the Invisible World *(1693), condemning the excesses of the trials but defending several of the trials' resulting convictions. Cotton's book was published at the same time as Increase's attack on the use of spectral evidence in the Salem trials, Cases of Conscience. Even though Increase was different in his assessment of the witch trials, Increase is said to have publicly burned Robert Calef's* More Wonders of the Invisible World *in Harvard Yard, a book attacking Cotton's book.*

Cotton Mather's discussion of suicide is distinctive in its quasi-medical character. He is particularly concerned with the etiology of suicidal acts; once suicidal ideation begins, it is intensified and taken advantage of by the intervention of devils (hence the title, "A Discourse on the Power and Malice of the Devils"). Nevertheless, it is possible to take steps to avoid this. In what may seem to modern readers to anticipate the role of psychiatric intervention, Mather emphasizes the importance for the potential victim of suicide of not keeping silent and of speaking with friends, physicians, and neighbors about feelings of guilt, sin, and what would now be identified as depression.

Source

Cotton Mather, *Memorable providences, relating to witchcrafts and possessions. : A faithful account of many wonderful and surprising things, that have befallen several bewitched and possessed persons in New-England. Particularly, a narrative of the marvellous trouble and releef experienced by a pious family in Boston, very lately and sadly molested with evil spirits. : Whereunto is added, a discourse delivered unto a congregation in Boston, on the occasion of that illustrious providence. : As also a discourse delivered unto the same congregation; on the occasion of an horrible self-murder committed in that town. : With an appendix, in vindication of a chapter in a late book of remarkable providences, from the calumnies of a Quaker at Pen-silvania*. Boston: Richard Pierce, 1689. Material in introductory passage from Stephen Latham.

Facsimile available online from the Yale University Library at www.library.yale.edu.

from MEMORABLE PROVIDENCES RELATING TO WITCHCRAFTS AND POSSESSIONS

Temptations to *Self-Murder*, may likewise be fierce upon some unhappy people here. Tis almost unaccountable, that at some times in some places here, melancholy distempered Ragings toward *Self-Murder*, have been in a manner *Epidemical*. And it would make ones hair stand, to see or hear what manifest Assistence the Devils have given to these *unnatural Self-executions* when *once* they have been begun. Tis *too* evident, that persons are commonly *bewitch'd* or *possess'd i*nto these unreasonable Phrensies. But What shall these hurried people do?

My Advice is,

Don't *Conceal*, much less *Obey* the motions of your Adversary. Failing in this, made a poor man, after a faithful Sermon in a Neighbouring Town, presently to drown himself in a pit that had not two Foot of water in it. If you will not *Keep*, that is the way not to *Take* the Devil's Counsel. Let not him *Tie* your *Tongues*, and it is likely he will not *gain* your *Souls*. Complain to a good *God* of the Dangers in which you find your selves; cry to Him, *Lord, I am oppressed undertake for me*. Complain also to a wise *Friend*. Let some prudent and faithful Neighbour understand your Circumstances: Tis possible you may thereby escape the *Snares* with which the cruel *Fowlers* of *Hell* hope to trapan you into their dismal Clutches for evermore. Your Neighbours may do much for you; and may prove your *Keepers* if God shall please. It may be the *unkindness* of some Friend, may have thrown you into your present Madness. Now the *kindness* of some Friend may prove the Antidote. *Many times* a *Natural Distemper*, is that by which the Devil takes advantage to get the Souls of Self-destroyers into his bloody hands. In this case, for the tempted persons to *disclose* their *Griefs*, will be the way to *obtain* their *cures*. Their Neighbours ought now to consult a *skilful Physician* for them; and *oblige*, yea, *constrain* them to follow his Directions. When the *Humours* on and *by* which the Devil works, are taken away, perhaps he may be starved out of doors. *Many times*, again, the Sin of *Slothfulness* gives the Devil opportunity to procure the Self-destruction of the sluggard. In this case too, the Tempted person may be succoured by the *standers-by* becoming sensible of their Circumstances. Their Neighbours may now *compel* them to follow their business. A *Calling*, the *Business* of a *Calling*, is an Ordinance of *God*, sanctified by him to deliver us from the evil Spirits that enter into the *empty House*,

But *most times*, There may be some old and great *Sin* unrepented of, where Temptations to *Self-murder* have a violence hardly to be withstood. There was once a Man among us, who in the horrours of Despair, uttered many dreadful speeches against himself, and would often particularly say, *I am all on a* light Fire *under the wrath of God*! This man yet never confessed any unusual Sin, but this; that having gotten about Forty pounds by his Labour, he had *spent* it in *wicked Company*: But in his Anguish of Spirit he hanged himself. There was once a Woman among us, who under Sickness had made *vowes* of a *new Life*; but apprehending some defects in her conversation afterward, she fell into the distraction wherein she also hanged her self. And the Sin of *Adultery* and *Drunkenness* has more than once issued in such a destructive *Desperation*. In case of *this* or any *such* Guilt, *Confession* with *Repentance* affords a present Remedy. To fly from *Soul-terrour* by *Self-Murder*, is to leap out of the *Frying-pan* into the *Fire*. Poor tempted People, I must like *Paul* in prison, cry with a loud voice unto you, *Do your selves no harm*; all may be well yet, if you will hearken to the Counsels of the Lord.

Now, *Do thou, O God of peace*, bruise *Satan under our Feet. World without end*, Amen.

ISAAC WATTS (1674–1748)

from *A Defense Against the Temptation to Self-Murther*

Isaac Watts, regarded as the father of English hymnody, was born in Southampton, England, and studied at the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington, now inside London, until 1694. He then became a family tutor to Sir John Hartopp; Watts' rise to prominence as a preacher began with his sermons at Hartopp's family chapel in Freeby, Leicestershire, and cumulated in his appointment as a full pastor at the Mark Lane Independent (i.e., Congregational) Chapel, London, in 1702. Here he wrote many now-famous Protestant hymns, including "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," and "There is a Land of Pure Delight." His hymns and psalms are published in the collections Horae Lyricae *(1706),* Hymns and Spiritual Songs *(1707) and* Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament *(1719). Due to a breakdown in health, in 1712 he went to spend a week in Hertfordshire with Sir Thomas Abney, with whose family he would live for the rest of his life. Toward the end of his life Watts dedicated more time to writing, eventually publishing his influential work* Logic, or the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth *(1724).*

In A Defense Against the Temptation to Self-Murther *(1726), Watts discusses the "folly and danger" of suicide. The piece is a vehement exhortation in the form of a direct address to anyone who might be tempted to suicide, and it attempts to dissuade the suicidal person with both religious and social arguments. It would mean permanent damnation, Watts insists, from which there could be no repentance; it would mean shame, as evidenced by the disgrace of burial at the crossroads; and it would mean shame for one's family as well. Among the "dissuasions" Watts employs is an appeal to concern for others: "If it be so hard to you to bear a little poverty, shame, sorrow, reproach, etc. that you will die rather than bear it, why will you entail these on your kindred and on those who love you best?"*

Source

Isaac Watts, A Defense Against the Temptation to Self-Murther. London: Printed for J. Clark, R. Hett, E. Matthews, and R. Ford, 1726.

from A DEFENSE AGAINST THE TEMPTATION TO SELF-MURTHER

Some General Dissuasions from Self-Murther, by shewing the Folly and Danger of it.

WHEN this bloody practice has been proved to be *highly criminal* in the sight of God, we can hardly suppose that any other considerations should be more effectual to deter a man who professes Christianity from the guilt of so aggravated a sin: yet it may be possible to set the dangerous and dreadful consequences of this practice in a fuller view, a more diffusive and affecting

light: for if you turn it on all sides it has still some new appearances of terror, and furnishes out new *dissuasives* from the execution of it.

I. Consider that *'tis too dangerous an attempt to venture upon it unless you had a full assurance of its lawfulness*. Now suppose the power of your own iniquities, the artifices of the Tempter, and the prevailing ill humours of animal nature should join together so fatally as to blind your eyes against the full conviction of its sinfulness, yet you can never prove that *self-murther is certainly a lawful thing*. The furthest you can go is to suppose that possibly it may be lawful; but on the other hand, if you should be under a mistake, 'tis a dreadful, 'tis a fatal, 'tis an eternal one. You put your self beyond all possibility of rectifying this error through all the long ages of futurity.

Whatsoever vain fancies some of the *heathens* have indulg'd who knew not God, and had very little and dark apprehensions of a future state, yet in the *Christian* world the utmost that the most sanguine or most melancholy among this tribe can well pretend is, that *perhaps it may be Lawful, or at least that it is a little and a very pardonable crime,* (and they have been forced to wink their eyes against the light to arrive at this *perhaps*). But if it be not pardonable, then nothing remains for the criminal but everlasting punishment. That terrible word *eternal, eternal, eternal misery*, carries such a long doleful accent with it, and includes such an immense train of agonies without hope, that it is infinitely better to bear the sorrows, the trials and uneasiness of this life for a few short and uncertain years, than rashly to venture upon such a practice, whose pretended and doubtful advantages bear no proportion at all to the infinite and extreme hazard of an endless state of torment.

II. Suppose you could by any false reasonings persuade your consciences that the act of self-destruction was no sin, yet *are you so sure of the present goodness of your state towards God, and that all your other sins are pardoned, that you could plunge your self this moment into eternity?* 'Tis generally under a fit of impatience that persons are tempted to destroy themselves; now is the present frame and temper of your soul such as is fit to appear in before the great tribunal of heaven? You well know that *as the tree falls so it must lie, to the north or to the south*, Eccl. xi. 3. *After death judgment* immediately succeeds, *Heb*. ix. 27. There is no faith and repentance in the grave, nor pardoning grace to be implored when the state of trial is past, *Eccl*. ix. 10. *Isa*. xxxviii. 18. *They that go down to the pit cannot hope for thy truth*. Are you now so sure of your creator's love, and of your perfect conformity to his laws of judgment? Are you so holy, so innocent, so righteous in your self, or so certain of your interest in the merits of a mediator, that you dare rush this moment before the bar of a great and terrible God, and tell him that you are come to have your state determined for all everlasting? If not, be wise and bethink yourself a little: use and improve the delay and opportunity which his grace and providence offer you in this life, for a more effectual securing a better life hereafter.

But if we go a little farther and suppose the *action in it self to be criminal*, then remember that you send your self out of this world with the guilt of a wilful criminal action on your conscience; you preclude your own repentance of this sin in this world, and the other world knows no repentance that is available to any good purpose. You shoot your self headlong into and eternal state; and are you sure that you shall never repent of it in the long future ages of your existence? But, alas! all that repentance comes too late to relieve you from the dismal effects of your rashness. All the repentance of that invisible world is but the sting of conscience which will add exquisite pain to your appointed punishment. Surely you should have the most evident and undeniable proofs

of the goodness of that action which can never be revers'd, and which puts you for ever beyond the possibility of useful repentance.

Give me leave to add in this place what is the constant doctrine of the Bible and the sense of Christians, (*viz.*) that a *wilful sinner dying impenitent cannot be sav'd*. Now if there be no space given for serious reflection and penitence in the case of a *self-murtherer*, what room is there for hope hereafter? except only where the persons really distracted, and the Great God our Judge knows how to distinguish exactly how far every action is influenced by bodily distempers. This is the only hope of surviving friends.

III. Think yet again, *what an odium, what scandal and everlasting shame you bring upon your name and character by such a fact.* 'Tis a reproach that spreads wide among the kindred of the self-murtherer; it descends to his posterity and follows him thro' many generations.

It may observed also that in the *Rubrick of the Church of England* before the burial service, *self-murtherers* are ranked with *excommunicated persons:* The church has no hope of them as true Christians: And as the church denies them *Christian burial*, so the *civil government* did heretofore appoint that they should be put into the earth with the utmost contempt; and this was generally done in some publick *cross-way*, that the shame and infamy might be made known to every passenger; and that this infamy might be lasting, they were ordained to have a stake driven through their dead bodies which was not to be removed. 'Tis pity this practice has been omitted of late years by the too favourable sentence of their neighbors on the jury, who generally pronounce them *distracted*: And thus they are excused from this publick mark of abhorrence. Perhaps 'twere much better if this practice were revived again; for since the laws of men cannot punish their persons, therefore their dead bodies should be expos'd to just and deserved shame, that so this iniquity might be laid under all the *odium* that human power and law can cast upon it, to testify a just abhorrence of the fact, and to deter survivors from the like practice.

IV. Can *any man of a generous or kind disposition think of all the mischief done to his friends and kindred by the destruction of himself*, and yet practice it? Think of the publick scandal and disgrace that it spreads over the whole family; think of the shame and inward anguish of spirit that it necessarily gives to surviving friends and relatives; what sorrow of heart for the loss of a father, or mother or brother, a sister, a daughter, or a son in such a sudden, such a dreadful, and such a shameful manner of death? What terrible perplexity of spirit what inconsolable vexation of mind, what fears of eternal misery for the soul of the deceas'd? This gives them a wound beyond what they are able to bear, and sometimes wears out their life in sorrow, and brings them down to the grave. One would think that the injury done to friends and dear relations would be sufficient bar against it, to souls who have any sense of justice, or any pretence to goodness and love. If it be so hard for you to bear a little *poverty, shame, sorrow, reproach, &c.* that you will die rather than bear it, why will you entail these on your kindred and on those who love you best?

In order to work upon persons that have any compassion for their surviving kindred, 'tis fit they should know also that the *English Law* calls a *Self-Murtherer, felo de se,* or a *felon to himself*, and upon this account the estate and effects of the deceased are forfeited by law and cannot descend to the relatives, unless it appear that the person who laid violent hand upon himself was distracted. Now in this case Bishop *Fleetwood* finds fault severely with *juries* who now a days bring in almost all *self-murtherers* distracted, and he desires them to consider "Whether the constant mitigation of the rigours of the law against *self-murtherers* mayn't give some encouragement to that practice and whether the favourable verdict they bring in, be always so righteous and so seasonable as they imagine? And since the wisdom of the law intends that the *confiscation*

of estates, the *undoing a family*, and the *shameful burial* shall deter them from these horrible attempts, whether the mercy that defeats all these intentions be not more likely to continue than to repress these cruel violences? Were a person sure that his estate would be forfeited, and his effects carried away from his wife, children and family, were he sure that his dead body should be publickly expos'd, bury'd in the high-way, and with a stake driven through it as a mark of huge infamy, perhaps he would give way to calmer counsels, and be content to bear a little shame, or pain, or loss, till God saw fit to put an end to all his sufferings by natural means: And therefore an instance or two of such severity as is legal, well and wisely chosen, might prove a greater preservative against these violences, than such a constant and expected mercy, as we always find on these occasions: For men have now no fear of laws; and when they have laid aside the fear of God, they go about this business with great readiness, they are sure of favour in this world, and they will venture the other."

V. Think in the last place *how fatal an influence your example may have to bring death and ruin on others, and that on their immortal souls as well as their mortal life*. Remember what an effect the self-murther of *Saul* had, when his *armour bearer* followed him, and dy'd also by his own sword. And oftentimes where *self-murther* is practiced, it fills the heads of other melancholy and uneasy persons with the same bloody thoughts, and teaches them to enter into the same temptation. Think then with yourself, "What if I should not only destroy my own soul forever, but become the dreadful occasion of others destroying their souls, and flinging themselves into the same place of torture? What sharp accents will this add to my anguish of conscience, in hell, that I have led others into the same wretchedness without remedy, without hope, and without end?" Think and enquire whether every *self-murtherer* who may be influenced hereafter by your example to this impious fact, may not be sent particularly to visit your ghost in those invisible regions, and become a new tormentor. Whether all such future events may not be turn'd by the just judgment of God to encrease your agonies and horrors of soul in that world of despair and misery.

MONTESQUIEU (1689–1755)

from *The Persian Letters*

from *Considerations of the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*

from *The Spirit of the Laws*

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Bréde et de la Montesquieu, was a French political and social philosopher, jurist, satirist, and the first of the great French men of letters of the Enlightenment. Born at La Bréde near Bordeaux, Montesquieu was reared until the age of three by a peasant family, like

Montaigne [q.v.], in order that he might acquire an understanding of the lower classes. In 1696, his mother died, leaving him the barony of La Bréde at age seven. He left for school in 1700, attending the Collège de Juilly and later the University of Bordeaux, where he studied law to become an advocate in 1708. In 1716, his uncle Jean-Baptiste died, leaving him the barony of Montesquieu and the deputy presidency of the Bordeaux Parliament, a position of some honor. In 1721, he published The Persian Letters, *a satire of European (French) customs and society that made him famous.*

After 10 years of service, Montesquieu sold his political office and, in 1728, left for a three-year tour of Europe and England that had a great effect on his political and aesthetic sensibilities. By 1734, he finished his Consideration of the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline. *In this work, which exhibits his uniquely secular approach to history, Montesquieu argued that Rome's greatness was due to its adaptable institutions and martial values. In 1748, he published anonymously his best-known work,* The Spirit of the Laws, *a major and influential work of political theory. This work, among other things, outlined a classification of the different types of government—its notion of a separation of governmental powers, which Montesquieu derived from his observations of English government, influenced the Constitution of the United States—and examined the fundamental relationships that underlie the laws of a civilized society. Montesquieu declared history as the basis for human activity and viewed religion as a social phenomenon rather than an underlying force. In this respect, Montesquieu sought to establish a social science of man comparable to the natural sciences. He was committed to liberty as the key ingredient in a well-functioning civil society.*

In The Persian Letters, *Montesquieu employs a character drawn from a different society to criticize the usual arguments used against suicide in the Christian European west. In* Considerations of the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline, *he addresses self-love and altruism, in effect lamenting the suicide of Cato; and in the brief passage provided here from* The Spirit of the Laws, *he differentiates between the "educated" socially conditioned, principled suicides of the Roman Stoics and the "unaccountable" suicides of the English, attributable primarily to mental illness.*

Sources

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from THE PERSIAN LETTERS

Letter 76: Usbek to his friend Ibben, at Smyrna

In Europe the law treats suicides with the utmost ferocity. They are put to death for a second time, so to speak; their bodies are dragged in disgrace through the streets and branded, to denote infamy, and their goods are confiscated.

It seems to me, Ibben, that these laws are very unjust. When I am overcome by anguish, poverty, or humiliation, why must I be prevented from putting an end to my troubles, and harshly deprived of the remedy which lies in my power?

Why am I required to work for a society from which I consent to be excluded, and to submit against my will to a convention which was made without my participation? Society is based on mutual advantage, but when I find it onerous what is to prevent me renouncing it? Life was given to me as favour, so I may abandon it when it is one no longer; when the cause disappears, the effect should disappear also.

Would the king want me to be subject to him when I derive no advantages from being a subject? Can my fellow-citizens be so unfair as to drive me to despair for their conveniences? Is God to be different from every other benefactor, and is it his will that I should be condemned to accept favours which make me wretched?

I am obliged to obey the law so long as I continue to live under its authority, but when I no longer do so does it still apply to me?

But, it will be said, you are disturbing the providential order. God united your soul to your body, and you are separating them; you are therefore going against his intentions, and resisting him.

What does that imply? Am I disturbing the order of Providence when I modify the arrangement of matter and turn a sphere into a cube, when it had been given its spherical shape by the first laws of motion, that is to say the laws of creation and conservation? Of course not: I am merely exercising a right which I have been given; and in this sense I could disrupt the whole of nature at will, and it would be impossible to say that I am opposing Providence.

When my soul is separated from my body, will the universe be less orderly or less well arranged? Do you believe that the new synthesis will be less perfect, or less dependent on general laws, or that the world will have lost anything by it? The works of God will be any the less great, or rather less immense? When my body has been turned into a grain of wheat, or a worm, or a piece of turf, do you think that these products of nature are less worthy of her? Or that when my soul has been purged of every terrestrial ingredient it will be less exalted?

All such ideas, my dear Ibben, originate in our pride alone. We do not realize our littleness, and in spite of everything we want to count for something in the universe, play a part, be a person of importance. We imagine that the annihilation of a being as perfect as ourselves would detract from nature as a whole, and we cannot conceive that one man more or less in the world, and indeed the whole of mankind a hundred million heads like ours, are only a minute, intangible speck, which God perceives simply because of the immensity of his knowledge.

From Paris, the 15th of the moon of Saphar, 1715

from CONSIDERATION OF THE CAUSES OF THE GREATNESS OF THE ROMANS AND THEIR DECLINE

. . . Almost all ventures are spoiled by the fact that those who undertake them usually seek—in addition to the main objective—certain small, personal successes which flatter their self-love and give them self-satisfaction.

I believe that if Cato had preserved himself for the republic, he would have given a completely different turn to events. Cicero's talents admirably suited him for a secondary role, but he was not fit for the main one. His genius was superb, but his soul was often common. With Cicero, virtue was the accessory, with Cato, glory. Cicero always thought of himself first, Cato always forgot about himself. The latter wanted to save the republic for its own sake, the former in order to boast of it. . . .

Brutus and Cassius killed themselves with inexcusable precipitation, and we cannot read this chapter in their lives without pitying the republic which was thus abandoned. Cato had killed himself at the end of the tragedy; these began it, in a sense, by their death.

Several reasons can be given for this practice of committing suicide that was so common among the Romans: the advances of the Stoic sect, which encouraged it; the establishment of triumphs and slavery, which made many great men think they must not survive a defeat; the advantage those accused of some crime gained by bringing death upon themselves, rather than submitting to a judgment whereby their memory would be tarnished and their property confiscated; a kind of point of honor, more reasonable, perhaps, than that which today leads us to slaughter our friend for a gesture or word; finally, a great opportunity for heroism, each man putting an end to the part he played in the world wherever he wished.

We could add to these a great facility in executing the deed. When the soul is completely occupied with the action it is about to perform, with the motive determining it, with the peril it is going to avoid, it does not really see death, for passion makes us feel but never see.

Self-love, the love of our own preservation, is transformed in so many ways, and acts by such contrary principles, that it leads us to sacrifice our being for the love of our being. And such is the value we set on ourselves that we consent to cease living because of a natural and obscure instinct that makes us love ourselves more than our very life. It is certain that men have become less free, less courageous, less disposed to great enterprises than they were when, by means of this power which one assumed, one could at any moment escape from every other power.

from THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS

Of the Laws against Suicides. We do not find in history that the Romans ever killed themselves without a cause; but the English are apt to commit suicide most unaccountably; they destroy themselves even in the bosom of happiness. This action among the Romans was the effect of education, being connected with their principles and customs; among the English it is the consequence of a distemper, being connected with the physical state of the machine, and independent of every other cause.

In all probability it is a defect of the filtration of the nervous juice: the machine, whose motive faculties are often unexerted, is weary of itself; the soul feels no pain, but a certain uneasiness in existing. Pain is a local sensation, which leads us to the desire of seeing an end of it; the burden of life, which prompts us to the desire of ceasing to exist, is an evil confined to no particular part.

It is evident that the civil laws of some countries may have reasons for branding suicide with infamy: but in England it cannot be punished without punishing the effects of madness.

VOLTAIRE (1694–1778)

from *Philosophical Dictionary* (expanded in Archive)

In his 83 years, Voltaire compiled an enormous body of work: drama, satire, novels, poetry, histories, essays, philosophy, and letters by the thousands. He is known for his outspoken critiques of social injustice, superstition, and intolerance, pursued with characteristic wit and critical aptness.

Born François-Marie Arouet in Paris, Voltaire's mother died when he was seven. He was educated by the Jesuits and directed toward a legal career by his pragmatic father, who disapproved of his son's interest in drama and poetry. Voltaire quickly abandoned the study of law to pursue his literary aspirations. At 22, because of a political satire he had directed toward the ruling Duke of Orléans, Voltaire spent 11 months imprisoned in the Bastille, during which time he wrote Oedipe *(1718), the first of some 50 tragedies, and an early version of his epic poem* Henriade *(1723)*

In 1726, after being beaten and thrown into the Bastille for the second time, Voltaire was exiled to England at his own request. As a result of his positive experiences and growth in England, he wrote the Letters Concerning the English Nation *(1733), which express his opposition to political and religious oppression and contain an implicit attack on French institutions. The next years, happy ones spent with his mistress Mme. du Châtelet in the study of science (particularly Newton, whom he and Mme. du Châtelet popularized), and history saw Voltaire embrace a philosophy of optimism, revealed in the* Discourses in Verse on Man *(1738–52). In 1750, Voltaire accepted the invitation of Frederick the Great to relocate to the Prussian court in Potsdam; however, Voltaire and Frederick's friendship became strained, and Voltaire fled three years later. He eventually settled in Geneva.*

As a result of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, Voltaire's philosophical outlook moved away from the optimistic belief that reason could reveal the secrets of nature. His attack on optimism culminated in Candide *(1759), a masterpiece of dark comedy. In his later years, Voltaire published the* Dictionnaire Philosophique (Philosophical Dictionary) *(1764). He moved to Ferney, a quiet base from which he would continue his tireless defense of victims of injustice for the next 20 years. At the performance of his last tragedy* Irène *in Paris in 1778, he was celebrated as the greatest living Frenchman, the embodiment of the Age of Enlightenment, and as one of the most effective champions ever known of freedom, tolerance, and common sense.*

In the entry "Cato" in his Philosophical Dictionary, *Voltaire explores a variety of issues and examples concerning suicide, from the follies of the English to the apparent lack of "common sense" in the*

texts of the Quran [q.v.] prohibiting suicide; Voltaire's much shorter entry "Suicide" partly duplicates the discussion. He is widely conversant with the previous literature on the topic of suicide. He cites a variety of examples of prominent English suicides and alludes to the claim that a propensity to suicide is hereditary, but concludes that suicide is largely a cultural phenomenon, a matter of fashion as much as anything. It is also associated with a lack of engagement: the remedy, he implies, is to have something to do. Voltaire also asserts both in this text and in similar comments on Beccaria's [q.v.] An Essay on Crimes and Punishments *chapter xix:* Of Suicide, *pp. 180–182 (Philadelphia 1809) that "the cannon law assures us, that Judas committed a greater crime in hanging himself, than in betraying Jesus Christ."*

Sources

William F. Fleming, ed. and tr., *Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary*. Paris, London, New York, Chicago: E. R. DuMont, 1901. Entry "Cato: On Suicide, and the Abbe St. Cyran's Book Legitimating Suicide," vol. III, pp. 19–33. Also available from the Online Library of Liberty at http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0370.php.

from PHILOSOPHICAL DICTIONARY

Cato: On Suicide, and the Abbe St. Cyran's Book Legitimating Suicide

The ingenious La Motte says of Cato, in one of his philosophical rather than poetical odes . . .

Stern Cato, with more equal soul,
Had bowed to Cæsar's wide control—
With Rome had to the conqueror bowed—
But that his spirit, rough and proud,
Had not the courage to await
A pardoned foe's too humbling fate.

It was, I believe, because Cato's soul was always equal, and retained to the last its love for his country and her laws that he chose rather to perish with her than to crouch to the tyrant. He died as he had lived. Incapable of surrendering! And to whom? To the enemy of Rome—to the man who had forcibly robbed the public treasury in order to make war upon his fellow-citizens and enslave them by means of their own money. A pardoned foe! It seems as if La Motte-Houdart were speaking of some revolted subject who might have obtained his majesty's pardon by letters in chancery.

It seems rather absurd to say that Cato slew himself through weakness. None but a strong mind can thus surmount the most powerful instinct of nature. This strength is sometimes that of frenzy, but a frantic man is not weak.

Suicide is forbidden amongst us by the canon law. But the decretals, which form the jurisprudence of a part of Europe, were unknown to Cato, to Brutus, to Cassius, to the sublime Arria, to the Emperor Otho, to Mark Antony, and the rest of the heroes of true Rome, who preferred a voluntary death to a life which they believed to be ignominious.

We, too, kill ourselves, but it is when we have lost our money, or in the very rare excess of foolish passion for an unworthy object. I have known women kill themselves for the most stupid men imaginable. And sometimes we kill ourselves when we are in bad health, which action is a real weakness.

Disgust with our own existence, weariness of ourselves is a malady which is likewise a cause of suicide. The remedy is a little exercise, music, hunting, the play, or an agreeable woman. The man who, in a fit of melancholy, kills himself to-day, would have wished to live had he waited a week.

I was almost an eye-witness of a suicide which deserves the attention of all cultivators of physical science. A man of a serious profession, of mature age, of regular conduct, without passions, and above indigence, killed himself on Oct. 17, 1769, and left to the town council of the place where he was born, a written apology for his voluntary death, which it was thought proper not to publish lest it should encourage men to quit a life of which so much ill is said. Thus far there is nothing extraordinary; such instances are almost every day to be met with. The astonishing part of the story is this:

His brother and his father had each killed himself at the same age. What secret disposition of organs, what sympathy, what concurrence of physical laws, occasions a father and his two sons to perish by their own hands, and by the same kind of death, precisely when they have attained such a year? Is it a disease which unfolds itself successively in the different members of a family—as we often see fathers and children die of smallpox, consumption, or any other complaint? Three or four generations have become deaf or blind, gouty or scorbutic, at a predetermined period.

Physical organization, of which moral is the offspring, transmits the same character from father to son through a succession of ages. The Appii were always haughty and inflexible, the Catos always severe. The whole line of the Guises were bold, rash, factious; compounded of the most insolent pride, and the most seductive politeness. From Francis de Guise to him who alone and in silence went and put himself at the head of the people of Naples, they were all, in figure, in courage, and in turn of mind, above ordinary men. I have seen whole length portraits of Francis de Guise, of the Balafré, and of his son: they are all six feet high, with the same features, the same courage and boldness in the forehead, the eye, and the attitude.

This continuity, this series of beings alike is still more observable in animals, and if as much care were taken to perpetuate fine races of men as some nations still take to prevent the mixing of the breeds of their horses and hounds the genealogy would be written in the countenance and displayed in the manners. There have been races of crooked and of six-fingered people, as we see red-haired, thick-lipped, long-nosed, and flat-nosed races. But that nature should so dispose the organs of a whole race that at a certain age each individual of that family will have a passion for self-destruction—this is a problem which all the sagacity of the most attentive anatomists cannot resolve. The effect is certainly all physical, but it belongs to occult physics. Indeed, what principle is not occult? We are not informed, nor is it likely that in the time of Cæsar and the emperors the inhabitants of Great Britain killed themselves as deliberately as they now do, when they have the vapors which they denominate the spleen.

On the other hand, the Romans, who never had the spleen, did not hesitate to put themselves to death. They reasoned, they were philosophers, and the people of the island of Britain were not so. Now, English citizens are philosophers and Roman citizens are nothing. The

Englishman quits this life proudly and disdainfully when the whim takes him, but the Roman must have an *indulgentia in articulo mortis*; he can neither live nor die.

Sir William Temple says that a man should depart when he has no longer any pleasure in remaining. So died Atticus. Young women who hang and drown themselves for love should then listen to the voice of hope, for changes are as frequent in love as in other affairs.

An almost infallible means of saving yourself from the desire of self-destruction is always to have something to do. Creech, the commentator on Lucretius, marked upon his manuscripts: "N. B. Must hang myself when I have finished." He kept his word with himself that he might have the pleasure of ending like his author. If he had undertaken a commentary upon Ovid he would have lived longer. Why have we fewer suicides in the country than in the towns? Because in the fields only the body suffers; in the town it is the mind. The laborer has not time to be melancholy; none kill themselves but the idle—they who, in the eyes of the multitude, are so happy. . . .

. . . It might, indeed, astonish us, and does, I think, merit a serious examination, that almost all the ancient Roman heroes killed themselves when they had lost a battle in the civil wars. But I do not find, neither in the time of the League, nor in that of the Fronde, nor in the troubles of Italy, nor in those of England, that any chief thought proper to die by his own hand. These chiefs, it is true, were Christians, and there is a great difference between the principles of a Christian warrior and those of a Pagan hero. But why were these men whom Christianity restrained when they would have put themselves to death, restrained by nothing when they chose to poison, assassinate, and bring their conquered enemies to the scaffold? Does not the Christian religion forbid these murders much more than self-murder, of which the New Testament makes no mention? . . .

Laws Against Suicide

Has any law, civil or religious, ever forbidden a man to kill himself, on pain of being hanged after death, or on pain of being damned? It is true that Virgil has said . . .

The next in place, and punishment, are they
Who prodigally throw their souls away—
Fools, who repining at their wretched state,
And loathing anxious life, suborn their fate;
With late repentance now they would retrieve
The bodies they forsook, and wish to live;
Their pains and poverty desire to bear,
To view the light of heaven and breathe the vital air;—
But fate forbids, the Stygian floods oppose,
And, with nine circling streams, the captive souls inclose.

—Aeneis, lib. vi. v. 434 et seq., tr. Dryden.

Such was the religion of some of the pagans, yet, notwithstanding the weariness which awaited them in the next world it was an honor to quit this by killing themselves—so contradictory are

the ways of men. And among us is not duelling unfortunately still honorable, though forbidden by reason, by religion, and by every law? If Cato and Cæsar, Antony and Augustus, were not duellists it was not that they were less brave than our Frenchmen. If the duke of Montmorency, Marshal de Marillac, de Thou, Cinq-Mars, and so many others, chose rather to be dragged to execution in a wagon, like highwaymen, than to kill themselves like Cato and Brutus, it was not that they had less courage than those Romans, nor less of what is called honor. The true reason is that at Paris self-murder in such cases was not then the fashion; but it was the fashion at Rome.

The women of the Malabar coast throw themselves, living, on the funeral piles of their husbands. Have they, then, more courage than Cornelia? No; but in that country it is the custom for the wives to burn themselves. . . .

. . . I seek not to apologize for an act which the laws condemn, but neither the Old Testament, nor the New has ever forbidden man to depart this life when it has become insupportable to him. No Roman law condemned self-murder; on the contrary, the following was the law of the Emperor Antoine, which was never revoked:

"If your father or your brother not being accused of any crime kill himself, either to escape from grief, or through weariness of life, or through despair, or through mental derangement, his will shall be valid, or, if he die intestate his heirs shall succeed." Notwithstanding this humane law of our masters we still drag on a sledge and drive a stake through the body of a man who has died a voluntary death; we do all we can to make his memory infamous; we dishonor his family as far as we are able; we punish the son for having lost his father, and the widow for being deprived of her husband.

We even confiscate the property of the deceased, which is robbing the living of the patrimony which of right belongs to them. This custom is derived from our canon law, which deprives of Christian burial such as die a voluntary death. Hence it is concluded that we cannot inherit from a man who is judged to have no inheritance in heaven. The canon law, under the head "De Pœnitentia," assures us that Judas committed a greater crime in strangling himself than in selling our Lord Jesus Christ.

CALEB FLEMING (1698–1779)

from *A Dissertation Upon the Unnatural Crime of Self-Murder* (expanded in Archive)

Caleb Fleming was born in Nottingham and brought up in a Calvinist home. Fleming's early desire was to enter the ministry; as a boy he learned shorthand in order to write down sermons. However, when Presbyterian minister John Hardy opened a nonconformist academy in 1714, Fleming, while a student there, rejected his parents' religion and decided to pursue a life in business. Fleming married

and moved to London in 1727; apparently, he lived by writing but was often in financial straits. Under the entreaties of friends, Fleming entered the dissenting ministry. Through a series of sermons, he eventually secured the post of pastor (though he classed himself as an independent) for the Presbyterian congregation at Bartholomew Close where he ministered for 15 years before the congregation shrank to nonexistence and the meeting-house lease expired. When he died, he left the epigraph of a "dissenting teacher" on his gravestone.

Fleming was a prolific pamphleteer: he died with over a hundred combative theological and political works to his credit, although most were published anonymously. His principal work, "A Survey of the Search After Souls" (1758), contends that the soul possesses a "capacity of immortality" rather than an inherent immortality. His unique, anti-trinitarian confession of faith is seen in "True Deism, the Basis of Christianity" (1749). In one sermon, he classified Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Cicero, and Seneca among vehicles of divine revelation. Many of his writings and exhortations addressed the topic of moral corruption.

In the lengthy A Dissertation Upon the Unnatural Crime of Self-Murder *(1773), excerpted here, Fleming uses a variety of theological and moral arguments to show the "unnaturalness" and "great depravity" of suicide. Among them, he argues that earthly life is a probationary period and so ought not to be interrupted, and that suicide is "so deformed" that the prohibition of it need not be explicitly mentioned in the Bible. There are no exceptions and no excuses, and the fact that a suicide victim was of unbalanced mind carries no weight. Unlike many other Christian apologists (including Augustine [q.v.]), Fleming does not find grounds for excusing the various Biblical suicides, and insists, for example, that Saul, Saul's armor-bearer, and Ahitophel were all "extremely wicked."*

Source

Caleb Fleming, *A Dissertation Upon the Unnatural Crime of Self-Murder*. London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1773, excerpted from pp. 2–21, 24.

from A DISSERTATION UPON THE UNNATURAL CRIME OF SELF-MURDER

. . . I shall . . . presume first to lay down, and afterwards prove, the truth of this proposition, viz. "That not any thing can be more unnatural, and argue a greater depravity of mind, than self-murder." Yet here I would be understood to except such, who, by the hand of God, are deprived of the use of their reason and understanding. To those who do believe there is a God, and that man is accountable, this will be one powerful reason against the act of suicism, viz. that the present mode of man's existence is, and must be probationary. It should appear to be a self-evident truth, that during the term of human life, wherein man has the use of his intellectual faculties and powers continued to him, he is a probationer, and as such is appointed to conflict with temptation. Now every man is well informed, that the breath which is in his nostrils, is not under his own volition or command; and that what propriety he has in it, is only that of a loan, which affords him no manner of right to give it a

dismission at his own pleasure. The life-principle, he knows, is not his own; because it operates wholly under another's direction. In other words, he has no hand at all in that wonderful principle or power, which animates his bodily machine. . . .

Since, therefore, life is a divine communication, it behoves us to reverence and hold sacred the important gift, nor ever once resign, or consent to sacrifice it, but upon the altar of truth and God. Of so great importance is life, that an incessant care to preserve it from any apprehended peril, is a first law of our make . . .—I am persuaded, there truly is not one supposable circumstance, which can possibly enter into the compass of human trial, where man could be justified in taking away his own life. . . .

. . . We may further consider suicism, not only as a crime unbecoming a probationary state, and no way pardonable in a candidate for a world of recompence, but also as in itself so very shockingly deformed, as not to have been discriminately noticed in any of the divine prohibitions; just as if it was not supposable, that an intelligent rational creature, accountable to its Creator, could ever once admit the shocking idea, the unnatural, abhorrent image. And, in fact, there does not appear to have been a record made of any suicides in the sacred history, but those of the most abandoned characters. Saul and his armour-bearer, we may conclude to have been extremely wicked. So was Ahitophel, who first set his house in order, and then hanged himself. A very deliberate self-murderer. So was that miscreant, Judas, the traitor. And may we not say of all such, "better they had never been born."—For in the very last act they perform, they willfully and impiously withdraw themselves from the animating spirit of God, and leave themselves no space for repentance . . . yet the extreme deformity and malignity of suicism, is what should be inferred, from its not having had any distinct, discriminating idea given of it, in any of the written laws of God. Its diametrical opposition to the most powerful instinctive principles of self-preservation in the breast of every man, seems to have rendered needless any express prohibition.

Self-murder may be yet further considered, as an act of high-treason, not only against the sovereignty of the universal Lord, but against the laws of human society. It destroys the very foundation of social virtue, and of all moral obligation. For this is one of the two principles or axioms, on which all moral virtue and piety does support, viz. "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." . . . Now, if we can thus capitally abuse ourselves, as to become persuaded we may take away life at our pleasure, and so quit our appointed stations, then that fundamental principle or axiom is of little meaning, and has in it nothing useful. . . .

. . . Should it now be asked, what are the apologies which have been made for self-murder? They have been such as follow.

There are some who have pleaded in excuse for the suicide, "that the act is in itself a proof of insanity; and that no man ever had the use of his reason when he destroyed himself."

To such I would reply, that the same apology might be made for every wicked action which men commit; because it had place from reason being dethroned, and from appetite and passion having usurped the reins of government. . . . Suicism, on the contrary, has more aggravations in it, than many capital crimes for which men are cut off by the punishing hand of justice. . . .

JOHN WESLEY (1703–1791)

Thoughts on Suicide

An English preacher and writer, John Wesley and his brother Charles were the founders of Methodism. Born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England to Anglican rector Samuel Wesley, John was educated at the Charterhouse School and was elected fellow of Lincoln College in 1726. Wesley viewed the clergy of the 18th-century Anglican church as incompetent, corrupt, and unconcerned with the large class of non-churchgoing people, a group to whom he directed many of his efforts, often at outdoor sermons. In 1729, he became an important participant in a religious group founded by his brother Charles at Oxford. This "Holy Club" was the first to adopt the name "Methodists," originally a pejorative descriptor given to the group by other students. After a disappointing attempt to introduce his religious views to the American colonies where his own outlook was deeply influenced by Moravian settlers, Wesley returned and began in 1739 to establish Methodist societies throughout England, traveling over 250,000 miles in his ministry. He spent most of his life traveling and preaching, and, in 1784, gave the Methodist societies a legal constitution. Before his death in 1791, he ordained Thomas Coke the principal Methodist Episcopal minister for the new church in the United States, marking the beginning of a Methodist separation from within the Church of England, although Wesley and his brother in particular would continue to urge their English followers to remain with the Church of England.

The impetus for Wesley's fervent proselytizing came in 1738, when he experienced a significant spiritual conversion. During a small religious meeting in London, he reported that his "heart was strangely warmed." He wrote, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation." This message became the central tenet of Wesley's lifelong missionary work.

In a very brief piece dated April 8, 1790, later published among his letters, Wesley discusses his thoughts on suicide. He is concerned that the then-existent laws of England, which held suicide to be a felony criminal offense (felo de se) *and were designed to deter suicide, were ineffective, since the courts were able to avoid conviction (and its disastrous consequences for heirs) by declaring the person insane. In the case of such a verdict, no action, such as seizing the suicide's estate for forfeiture to the crown or refusing a suicide Christian burial, could be taken. Recalling Plutarch's [q.v.] account of the way further suicides among the young women of Miletus were prevented by public exposure of the dead bodies naked, Wesley offers as his solution that the body of the suicide be hung in chains and publicly displayed. Surely, he thinks, this would end the "English fury" of suicides.*

Source

John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. XIII: Letters. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958. From the authorized edition published by the Wesleyan Conference Office, London, 1872.

THOUGHTS ON SUICIDE

It is a melancholy consideration, that there is no country in Europe, or perhaps in the habitable world, where the horrid crime of self-murder is so common as it is in England! One reason of this may be, that the English in general are more ungodly and more impatient than other nations. Indeed we have laws against it, and officers with juries are appointed to inquire into every fact of the kind. And these are to give in their verdict upon oath, whether the self-murderer was sane or insane. If he is brought in insane, he is excused, and the law does not affect him. By this means it is totally eluded; for the juries constantly bring him in insane. So the law is not of the least effect, though the farce of a trial still continues.

This morning I asked a Coroner, "Sir, did you ever know a jury bring in the deceased *felo de se?*" He answered, "No, Sir; and it is a pity they should." What then is the law good for? If all self-murderers are mad, what need of any trial concerning them?

But it is plain our ancestors did not think so, or those laws had never been made. It is true, every self-murderer is mad in some sense, but not in that sense which the law intends. This fact does not prove him mad in the eye of the law: The question is, Was he mad in other respects? If not, every juror is perjured who does not bring him in *felo de se*.

But how can this vile abuse of the law be prevented, and this execrable crime effectually discouraged?

By a very easy method. We read in ancient history, that, at a certain period, many of the women in Sparta murdered themselves. This fury increasing, a law was made, that the body of every woman that killed herself should be exposed naked in the streets. The fury ceased at once.

Only let a law be made and rigorously executed, that the body of every self-murderer, Lord or peasant, shall be hanged in chains, and the English fury will cease at once.

Liverpool, April 8, 1790. JOHN WESLEY.

DAVID HUME (1711–1776)

from *Of Suicide*

Letter to John Home of Ninewells (in Archive only)

David Hume, the philosopher, economist, and historian whose ideas and arguments continue to profoundly influence the course of philosophical thought, was born in Scotland. With his older brother, he began at the University of Edinburgh before the age of 12. Despite his family's suggestion that he read for the law, he chose to study philosophy (initially in secret, he later reported)

because, as he said, he had an "insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuit of philosophy and general learning." His intense studies made him for a time concerned for his health.

Recovered, Hume lived in France from 1734 to 1737 and wrote what is often considered his most important philosophical work, A Treatise of Human Nature *(1739–1740). Other notable works by Hume include* Essays, Moral and Political *(1741–42),* An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding *(1748),* An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals *(1751),* Political Discourses *(1752), and* History of England *(1754–1762). His* Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, *which critiques the argument from order and adaptation in nature to an intelligent designer of the universe, was published posthumously to forestall religious controversy. In 1763, Hume returned to France to take up a post at the British embassy, where his writings had made him popular among intellectuals, including those of the salon of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach [q.v.].*

Hume's philosophy is notable for its empiricism, naturalism, and skepticism. As an empiricist, he traces knowledge, belief, and the contents of thought itself to origins in experience. As a naturalist, he seeks to explain phenomena—even morality, thought, and other operations of the mind—in terms of ordinary laws of nature, without appeal to miracles, causally undetermined acts of "free will," eternal moral relations in the fabric of the universe, or a supernatural creator or legislator. As a skeptic, he emphasizes the weaknesses and limited scope of human cognitive faculties.

Hume's famous essay Of Suicide, *offered here in the authentic 1757 text (which differs considerably from the frequently reprinted posthumous 1777 and 1783 versions), provides a series of detailed and adroit objections to the principal points of Thomas Aquinas's [q.v.] arguments against suicide, including those that claim that suicide is "unnatural." Hume asserts that "suicide . . . may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame." Hume had written the suicide essay prior to June 1755 when he wrote to his bookseller about possible publication in a volume of longer dissertations (eventually published in 1757), but suppressed this and another essay,* On the Immortality of the Soul*—as he said in his letters, out of his "abundant Prudence". However, a few copies were circulated, one of which came into the hands of a French bookseller, who in 1770, brought out a French translation possibly made by Holbach; it was not published in English until a year after Hume's death, and then only in an edition without Hume's name or the publisher's identity.*

Hume's letter to John Home, his brother (both variants of the spelling were pronounced "hyum"), written at the age of 35 while Hume was serving as secretary to General James St. Clair, describes what some have called a "farcical" invasion of the coast of France. Hume's letter gives a compelling account of Hume's attempt, against the background of these circumstances, to prevent the death of a friend and military companion who had slit his veins. "Alas!" Hume says in explaining why he refused to assist the suicide as requested in the name of friendship, "we live not in Greek or Roman times."

Hume returned to Edinburgh in 1769, where he died in 1776 after a year-long illness. His friends reported that he faced death with composure and good humor.

Sources

David Hume, *Of Suicide* (1757), manuscript in the National Library of Scotland with corrections in Hume's own hand, text provided by Tom L. Beauchamp; "To John Home of Ninewells," from J. Y. T. Grieg, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932, Vol. 1, letter 53, pp. 94–95, 97–98, spelling modernized.

from OF SUICIDE

One considerable advantage, that arises from philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote, which it affords to superstition and false religion. All other remedies against that pestilent distemper are vain, or, at least, uncertain. Plain good-sense, and the practice of the world, which alone serve most purposes of life, are here found ineffectual: history, as well as daily experience, affords instances of men, endowed with the strongest capacity for business and affairs, who have all their lives crouched under slavery to the grossest superstition. Even gaiety and sweetness of temper, which infuse a balm into every other wound, afford no remedy to so virulent a poison; as we may particularly observe of the fair sex, who, though commonly possessed of these rich presents of nature, feel many of their joys blasted by this importunate intruder. But when sound philosophy has once gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectually excluded; and one may safely affirm, that her triumph over this enemy is more complete than over most of the vices and imperfections, incident to human nature. Love or anger, ambition or avarice, have their root in the temper and affections, which the soundest reason is scarce ever able fully to correct. But superstition, being founded on false opinion, must immediately vanish, when true philosophy has inspired juster sentiments of superior powers. The contest is here more equal between the distemper and the medicine: and nothing can hinder the latter from proving effectual, but its being false and sophisticated.

It will here be superfluous to magnify the merits of philosophy, by displaying the pernicious tendency of that vice, of which it cures the human mind. The superstitious man, says Tully, is miserable in every scene, in every incident in life. Even sleep itself, which banishes all other cares of unhappy mortals, affords to him matter of new terror; while he examines his dreams, and finds in those visions of the night, prognostications of future calamities. I may add, that, though death alone can put a full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence, from a vain fear, lest he offend his maker, by using the power, with which that beneficent being has endowed him. The presents of God and Nature are ravished from us by this cruel enemy; and notwithstanding that one step would remove us from the regions of pain and sorrow, her menaces still chain us down to a hated being, which she herself chiefly contributes to render miserable.

It is observed of such as have been reduced by the calamities of life to the necessity of employing this fatal remedy, that, if the unseasonable care of their friends deprive them of that species of death, which they proposed to themselves, they seldom venture upon any other, or can summon up so much resolution, a second time, as to execute their purpose. So great is our horror of death, that when it presents itself under any form, besides that to which a man has endeavored to reconcile his imagination, it acquires new terrors, and overcomes his feeble courage. But when the menaces of superstition are joined to this natural timidity, no wonder it quite deprives men of all power over their lives; since even many pleasures and enjoyments, to which we are carried by a strong propensity, are torn from us by this inhuman tyrant. Let us here endeavor to restore men to their native liberty, by examining all the common arguments against suicide, and showing, that that action may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame; according to the sentiments of all the antient philosophers.

If suicide be criminal, it must be a transgression of our duty either to God, our neighbor, or ourselves.

To prove, that suicide is no transgression of our duty to God, the following considerations may perhaps suffice. In order to govern the material world, the almighty creator has established general and immutable laws, by which all bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are maintained in their proper sphere and function. To govern the animal world, he has endowed all living creatures with bodily and mental powers; with senses, passions, appetites, memory, and judgment; by which they are impelled or regulated in that course of life, to which they are destined. These two distinct principles of the material and animal world continually encroach upon each other, and mutually retard or forward each other's operation. The powers of men and of all other animals are restrained and directed by the nature and qualities of the surrounding bodies; and the modifications and actions of these bodies are incessantly altered by the operation of all animals. Man is stopped by rivers in his passage over the surface of the earth; and rivers, when properly directed, lend their force to the motion of machines, which serve to the use of man. But though the provinces of the material and animal powers are not help entirely separate, there result from thence no discord or disorder in the creation: on the contrary, from the mixture, union, and contrast of all the various powers of inanimate bodies and living creatures, arises that surprising harmony and proportion, which affords the surest argument of supreme wisdom.

The providence of the deity appears not immediately in any operation, but governs every thing by those general and immutable laws, which have been established from the beginning of time. All events, in one sense, may be pronounced the action of the almighty: they all proceed from those powers, with which he has endowed his creatures. A house, which falls by its own weight, is not brought to ruin by his providence more than one destroyed by the hands of men; nor are the human faculties less his workmanship than the laws of motion and gravitation. When the passions play, when the judgment dictates, when the limbs obey; this is all the operation of God; and upon these animate principles, as well as upon the inanimate, has he established the government of the universe.

Every event is alike important in the eyes of that infinite being, who takes in, at one glance, the most distant regions of space and remotest periods of time. There is no one event, however important to us, which he has exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, or which he has peculiarly reserved for his own immediate action and operation. The revolutions of states and empires depend upon the smallest caprice or passion of single men; and the lives of men are shortened or extended by the smallest accident of air or diet, sunshine or tempest. Nature still continues her progress and operation; and if general laws be ever broke by particular volitions of the deity, it is after a manner which entirely escapes human observation. As on the one hand, the elements and other inanimate parts of the creation carry on their action without regard to the particular interest and situation of men; so men are entrusted to their own judgment and discretion in the various shocks of matter, and may employ every faculty, with which they are endowed, in order to provide for their ease, happiness, or preservation.

What is the meaning, then, of that principle, that a man, who, tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death, and makes his escape from this cruel scene; that such a man, I say, has incurred the indignation of his creator, by encroaching on the office of divine providence, and disturbing the order of the universe? Shall we assert, that the Almighty has reserved to himself, in any peculiar manner, the disposal of the lives of

men, and has not submitted that event, in common with others, to the general laws, by which the universe is governed? This is plainly false. The lives of men depend upon the same laws as the lives of all other animals; and these are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion. The fall of a tower or the infusion of a poison will destroy a man equally with the meanest creature: An inundation sweeps away every thing, without distinction, that comes within the reach of its fury. Since therefore the lives of men are for ever dependent on the general laws of matter and motion; is a man's disposing of his life criminal, because, in every case it is criminal to encroach upon these laws, or disturb their operation? But this seems absurd. All animals are entrusted to their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world, and have full authority, as far as their power extends, to alter all the operations of nature. Without the exercise of this authority, they could not subsist a moment. Every action, every motion of a man innovates in the order of some parts of matter, and diverts, from their ordinary course, the general laws of motion. Putting together, therefore, these conclusions, we find, that human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion, and that 'tis no encroachment on the office of providence to disturb or alter these general laws. Has not every one, of consequence, the free disposal of his own life? And may he not lawfully employ that power with which nature has endowed him?

In order to destroy the evidence of this conclusion, we must show a reason, why this particular case is excepted. Is it because human life is of such great importance, that it is a presumption for human prudence to dispose of it? But the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster. And were it of ever so great importance, the order of nature has actually submitted it to human prudence, and reduced us to a necessity, in every incident, of determining concerning it.

Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the almighty, that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives; it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction. If I turn aside a stone, which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar province of the almighty, by lengthening out my life, beyond the period, which, by the general laws of matter and motion, he had assigned to it.

A hair, a fly, an insect is able to destroy this mighty being, whose life is of such importance. Is it an absurdity to suppose, that human prudence may lawfully dispose of what depends on such insignificant causes?

It would be no crime in me to divert the Nile or Danube from its course, were I able to effect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channels!

Do you imagine that I repine at providence or curse my creation, because I go out of life, and put a period to a being, which, were it to continue, would render me miserable? Far be such sentiments from me. I am only convinced of a matter of fact, which you yourself acknowledge possible, that human life may be unhappy, and that my existence, if farther prolonged, would become uneligible. But I thank providence, both for the good, which I have already enjoyed, and for the power, with which I am endowed, of escaping the ill that threatens me. To you it belongs to repine at providence, who foolishly imagine that you have no such power, and who must still prolong a hated being, though loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty.

Do you not teach, that when any ill befalls me, though by the malice of my enemies, I ought to be resigned to providence; and that the actions of men are the operations of the almighty as much as the actions of inanimate beings? When I fall upon my sword, therefore, I receive my

death equally from the hands of the deity, and if it had proceeded from a lion, a precipice, or a fever.

The submission, which you require to providence, in every calamity, that befalls me, excludes not human skill and industry; if possibly, by their means, I can avoid or escape the calamity. And why may I not employ one remedy as well as another?

If my life be not my own, it were criminal for me to put it in danger, as well as to dispose of it: nor could one man deserve the appellation of *hero*, whom glory or friendship transports into the greatest dangers, and another merit the reproach of *wretch* or *miscreant*, who puts a period to his life, from the same or like motives.

There in no being, which possesses any power or faculty, that it receives not from its creator; nor is there any one, which, by ever so irregular an action, can encroach upon the plan of his providence, or disorder the universe. Its operations are his work equally with that chain of events, which it invades; and which ever principle prevails, we may, for that very reason, conclude it to be most favored by him. Be it animate, or inanimate, rational or irrational, it is all a case: its power is still derived from the supreme creator, and is alike comprehended in the order of his providence. When the horror of pain prevails over the love of life: when a voluntary action anticipates the effect of blind causes; it is only in consequence of those powers and principles, which he has implanted in his creatures. Divine providence is still inviolate, and placed far beyond the reach of human injuries.

It is impious, says the old Roman superstition, to divert rivers from their course, or invade the prerogatives of nature. It is impious, says the French superstition, to inoculate for the small-pox, or usurp the business of providence, by voluntarily producing distempers and maladies. It is impious, says the modern European superstition, to put a period to our own life, and thereby rebel against our creator. And why not impious, say I, to build houses, cultivate the ground, or sail upon the ocean? In all these actions, we employ our powers of mind and body to produce some innovation in the course of nature; and in none of them do we any more. They are all of them, therefore, equally innocent or equally criminal.

But you are placed by providence, like a sentinel, in a particular station; and when you desert it, without being recalled, you are guilty of rebellion against your almighty sovereign, and have incurred his displeasure. I ask, why do you conclude, that providence has placed me in this station? For my part, I find, that I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, of which many and even the principal, depended upon voluntary actions of men. *But providence guided all these causes, and nothing happens in the universe without its consent and cooperation*. If so, then neither does my death, however voluntary, happen without its consent; and whenever pain and sorrow so far overcome my patience as to make me tired of life, I may conclude, that I am recalled from my station, in the clearest and most express terms.

It is providence, surely, that has placed me at present in this chamber: but may I not leave it, when I think proper, without being liable to the imputation of having deserted my post or station? When I shall be dead, the principles, of which I am composed, will still perform their part in the universe, and will be equally useful in the grand fabric, as when they composed this individual creature. The difference to the whole will be no greater than between my being in a chamber and in the open air. The one change is of more importance to me than the other; but not more so to the universe.

It is a kind of blasphemy to imagine, that any created being can disturb the order of the world, or invade the business of providence. It supposes, that that being possesses powers and

faculties, which it received not from its creator, and which are not subordinate to his government and authority. A man may disturb society, no doubt; and thereby incur the displeasure of the almighty: but the government of the world is placed far beyond his reach and violence. And how does it appear, that the almighty is displeased with those actions, that disturb society? By the principles which he has implanted in human nature, and which inspire us with a sentiment of remorse, if we ourselves have been guilty of such actions, and with that of blame and disapprobation, if we ever observe them in others. Let us now examine, according to the method proposed, whether suicide be of this kind of actions, and be a breach of our duty to our neighbor and to society.

A man, who retires from life, does no harm to society. He only ceases to do good; which, if it be an injury, is of the lowest kind.

All our obligations to do good to society seem to imply something reciprocal. I receive the benefits of society, and therefore ought to promote its interest. But when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I be bound any longer?

But allowing, that our obligations to do good were perpetual, they have certainly some bounds. I am not obliged to do a small good to society, at the expense of a great harm to myself. Why then should I prolong a miserable existence, because of some frivolous advantage, which the public may, perhaps, receive from me? If upon account of age and infirmities, I may lawfully resign any office, and employ my time altogether in fencing against these calamities, and alleviating, as much as possible, the miseries of my future life: why may I not cut short these miseries at once by an action, which is no more prejudicial to society?

But suppose, that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of the public: suppose, that I am a burden to it: suppose, that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to the public. In such cases my resignation of life must not only be innocent but laudable. And most people, who lie under any temptation to abandon existence, are in some such situation. Those, who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humor with the world.

A man is engaged in a conspiracy for the public interest; is seized upon suspicion; is threatened with the rack; and knows, from his own weakness, that the secret will be extorted from him: could such a one consult the public interest better than by putting a quick period to a miserable life? This was the case of the famous and brave Strozzi of Florence.

Again, suppose a malefactor justly condemned to a shameful death; can any reason be imagined, why he may not anticipate his punishment, and save himself all the anguish of thinking on its dreadful approaches? He invades the business of providence no more than the magistrate did, who ordered his execution; and his voluntary death is equally advantageous to society, by ridding it of a pernicious member.

That suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question, who allows, that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burden, and make it worse even than annihilation. I believe that no man ever threw away life, while it was worth keeping. For such is our natural horror of death, that small motives will never be able to reconcile us to it. And though perhaps the situation of a man's health or fortune did not seem to require this remedy, we may at least be assured, that any one, who, without apparent reason, has had recourse to it, was cursed with such an incurable depravity or gloominess of temper, as must poison all enjoyment, and render him equally miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes.

If suicide be supposed a crime, it is only cowardice can impel us to it. If it be no crime, both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence, when it becomes a burden. It is the only way, that we can then be useful to society, by setting as example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his chance for happiness in life, and would effectually free him from all danger of misery.[1]

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712–1778)

from *Julie, or the New Heloise* (expanded in Archive)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher, novelist, and political essayist, profoundly influenced the Enlightenment period during which he lived and the Romantic movement and French Revolution to come. He was born in Geneva in 1712; his mother died within days of his birth. He had almost no formal education. He was apprenticed unsuccessfully to both a notary public and an engraver, and committed a series of petty thefts and other breaches of discipline that earned him beatings but did not change his behavior; they served largely to reinforce his hatred of authority. Rousseau finally found a patron in the wealthy baroness Mme. de Warens, with whom he lived at Annecy and at Chambéry. In about 1743, he took as his mistress an illiterate inn servant, Thérèse le Vasseur, with whom he fathered five children, all placed in a foundling hospital. Rousseau wrote an opera and papers on musical notation, for which he received some recognition. He published two influential essays in response to a competition established by the Academy of Dijon, the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences *(1750) and the* Discourse upon the Origin and Foundations of Inequality *(1755). Other important works by Rousseau include* Julie, or the New Heloise *(1761), from which the selection here is taken,* A Treatise on the Social Contract *(1762),* Emile, or On Education *(1762),* banned in Geneva and Paris, and burned publicly when it was first published; *and his remarkably intimate and ultimately influential* Confessions, *published posthumously.*

[1] It would be easy to prove, that suicide is as lawful under the Christian dispensation as it was to the heathens. There is not a single text of scripture, which prohibits it. That great infallible rule of faith and practice, which must control all philosophy and human reasoning, has left us, in this particular, to our natural liberty. Resignation to providence is, indeed, recommended in scripture; but that implies only submission to ills, which are unavoidable, not to such as may be remedied by prudence or courage. *Thou shalt not kill* is evidently meant to exclude only the killing of others, over whose life we have no authority. That this precept like most of the scripture precepts, must be modified by reason and common sense, is plain from the practice of magistrates, who punish criminals capitally, notwithstanding the letter of this law. But were this commandment ever so express against suicide, it could now have no authority. For all the law of Moses is abolished, except so far as it is established by the law of nature; and we have already endeavored to prove, that suicide is not prohibited by that law. In all cases, Christians and heathens are precisely upon the same footing; and if Cato and Brutus, Arria and Portia acted heroically, those who now imitate their example ought to receive the same praises from posterity. The power of committing suicide is regarded by Pliny as an advantage which men possess even above the deity himself. *Deus non sibi potest mortem consciscere, si velit, quod homini dedit optimum in tantis vitae paenis*. [Although God cannot inflict death upon himself, even if he would, he has given this to man as the best course in life's great pains.] Lib. ii. Cap. 7.

Rousseau's life and work were filled with controversy. Some of his works were banned in parts of Europe and burned in others; he was forced to flee arrest in Paris; and he experienced growing persecution during his travels in Europe. He eventually returned to Paris where he lived as a music copyist. Of a suspicious and paranoid temperament, he quarreled with his close friend David Hume [q.v.] and died at least partly insane in a cottage in Ermenonville in 1778.

Julie, or the New Heloise *is an epistolary novel, one among the many works expressing Rousseau's conviction that the Enlightenment's confidence in rational, scientific progress was misguided and that human culture and law were artificial, man-made constructs that created inequality and took humankind away from its natural, happier state. In the novel, two characters debate the issues in suicide: a young man, potentially suicidal, defending a secular argument in favor of suicide much influenced by classical literature and Stoicism, and the more senior Lord Edward Bomston, who uses religious and friendship-based covenantal considerations to argue against it. "Listen to me, mad youth," Bomston says in his reply to the young man's letter, in a much-repeated bit of advice, "let me teach you to love life. Every time you are tempted to exit it, say to yourself: 'Let me do one more good deed before I die' "—advice that Bomston believes will deter any morally decent human being.*

Source

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 6, trs. Philip Steward and Jean Vaché. Hanover and London: Dartmouth College; University Press of New England, 1997, letters 21 and 22, pp. 310–323.

from JULIE, OR THE NEW HELOISE

To Milord Edward

Yes, Milord, it is true; my soul is oppressed with the weight of life. For a long time it has been a burden to me; I have lost everything that could have endeared it to me, only the sorrows remain to me. But they say I have no right to dispose of it without an order from the one who gave it me. I also know that it belongs to you in more than one way. Your ministrations have saved it twice and your kindnesses constantly preserve it. I will never dispose of it without being sure of my right to do so without crime, nor so long as the slightest hope remains of employing it for you.

You used to say I was necessary to you; why did you deceive me? Since we have been in London, far from thinking of ways to make me useful to you, all you do is look after me. What superfluous precautions you take! Milord, as you know, I hate crime even more than life; I worship the eternal Being; I owe you everything, I love you, I hold to you alone on earth; friendship, duty can chain a miserable man to earth: pretexts and sophisms will never do so. Enlighten my reason, speak to my heart; I am ready to hear you: but remember that despair cannot easily be fooled.

You want reasoning: well then let us reason. . . . Let us seek truth peaceably, tranquilly. . . .

I have long meditated on this grave subject. That you must know, for you are aware of what has happened and I am still alive. The more I reflect on it, the more I find that the question comes down to this fundamental proposition: to seek what is good and flee what is ill for oneself insofar as it offends no one else is the right of nature. When our life is an ill for us and a good for no one it is therefore permissible to deliver oneself of it. If there is one evident and certain maxim in the world, I think that is it, and if someone managed to overturn it, there is no human deed that could not be made into a crime.

What do our Sophists say about this? First of all they regard life as something that is not ours, because it has been given to us; but it is precisely because it has been given to us that it is ours. Did God not give them two arms? Yet when they fear gangrene they have one cut off, and both, if need be. Precisely the same holds for anyone who believes in the immortality of the soul; for if I sacrifice my arm to preserve something more precious which is my body, I sacrifice my body to preserve something more precious which is my well-being. . . .

. . . They consider man living on earth as a soldier on sentry duty. God, they say, has placed you in this world, why do you quit it without his leave? But how about you, whom he has placed in your own city, why do you quit it without his leave? Is leave not implicit in ill-being? Wherever he places me, whether in a body, or on the earth, it is to remain there so long as I am well off, and to quit it as soon as I am badly off. Such is the voice of nature and of God. We are to await the order, I grant; but when I die naturally God does not order me to give up this life, he takes it from me: it is by making life unbearable to me that he orders me to give it up. In the first case, I hold out with all my strength, in the second I have the merit of obeying.

Can you imagine how there can be people unjust enough to stigmatize willful death as rebellion against providence, as if one meant to escape its laws? It is not to escape them that one ceases to live, but to carry them out. What! Does God have power only over my body? Is there some place in the universe where some extant being is not under his hand, and will he act less immediately on me, when my purified substance is more of a piece, and more like his own? No, his justice and goodness are my hope, and if I believed the death could remove me from his power, I would no longer wish to die.

These same Sophists ask whether life can ever be an evil? Considering the throng of errors, torments, and vices with which it is filled, one would be much more inclined to ask whether it was ever good? . . . The only means reason has found to spare us humanity's woes, is it not to detach us from worldly objects and all that is mortal in us, to meditate within ourselves, raise ourselves to sublime contemplations; and if our passions and errors cause our misfortunes, with what zeal ought we not yearn for a condition that delivers us from both?

. . . One long endures a painful and doleful life before resigning oneself to relinquishing it; but once the weariness of living overcomes the horror of dying, then life is obviously a great evil, and one cannot too soon be freed from it. Thus, although one cannot identify the precise point where it ceases being a good, at least one knows with certainty that it is an evil long before it so appears to us, and in every rational man the right to relinquish it comes well ahead of the temptation to do so.

. . . There is courage, no doubt, in suffering with constancy ills one cannot avoid; but only a fool would willingly suffer those he can elude without doing wrong, and it is often a very great wrong to endure a wrong needlessly. He who is unable to deliver himself from a painful life through a prompt death is like the man who prefers to let a wound fester rather than entrust it

to the salutary knife of a surgeon. Come, worthy Parisot [a surgeon from Lyon], cut off this leg of mine which is going to kill me. I will watch you do it without raising an eyebrow, and let myself be called a coward by the braggart who watches his own leg rot for fear of facing the same operation.

I admit there are duties towards others, which do not allow every man to dispose of himself, but on the other hand how many are there that command it? Let a Magistrate on whom the fatherland's welfare depends, let a paterfamilias who owes subsistence to his children, let an insolvent debtor who would ruin his creditors, devote themselves to their duty come what may; let a thousand other civil and domestic ties force an honorable unfortunate to bear the misfortune of living, so as to avoid the greater misfortune of being unjust, can one, for that, in completely different circumstances, preserve at the expense of a multitude of wretches a life that is useful solely to the man who dares not die? . . . why should the man who has no ties, the man Heaven has reduced to living alone on earth, the man whose wretched existence can yield nothing good, not have at least the right to quit an abode where his moans are bothersome and his sufferings fruitless?

Weigh these considerations, Milord; combine all these reasons and you will find that they come down to the simplest of natural rights which a reasonable man never questioned. Indeed, why should it be permissible to be cured of the gout and not of life? Are not the one and the other sent to us by the same hand? . . . No Milord, man's vocation is greater and nobler. God has not breathed life into him in order for him to remain immobile in a perpetual quietism. But he has given him freedom to do good, conscience to will it, and reason to choose it. He has constituted him sole judge of his own acts. He has written in his heart: do what is good for you and harmful to no one. If I feel it is right for me to die, I resist his command by clinging obstinately to life; for by making my death desirable, he instructs me to seek it.

Bomston, I appeal to your wisdom and your candor; what more certain maxims can reason deduce from Religion concerning willful death? If the Christians have established others contrary to them, they have drawn them neither from the principles of their Religion, nor from its unique rule, which is Scripture, but solely from pagan philosophers. Lactantius and Augustine, who first put forward this new doctrine on which neither Jesus Christ nor the Apostles had said a single word, founded themselves solely on the reasoning is the *Phaedo* which I have already contested; and so it is that the faithful who believe they are following in this the authority of the Gospel, are merely following Plato's. Indeed, where will one find in the entire Bible a law against suicide, or even a simple disapproval; and is it not quite strange that in the examples of people who have taken their own lives, not a word of blame is found against any of these examples? Furthermore, Samson's is sanctioned by a wonder that avenges him of his enemies. Would this miracle have been performed to justify a crime; and would this man who lost his strength for having allowed a woman to seduce him have recovered it to commit an authentic crime, as if God himself had wished to deceive mankind?

Thou shalt not kill, says the Decalogue. What follows from this? If this commandment is to be taken literally, one must kill neither evildoers nor enemies; and Moses who brought about the death of so many people had a very poor understanding of his own precept. If there are a few exceptions, the first of them is certainly in favor of willful death, because it is free of violence and injustice, the only two criteria that can make homicide criminal, and because nature has, besides, created sufficient obstacle to it. . . .

. . . Let us then flee without qualm all the ills we can flee, there will always be only too many left for us to suffer. Let us deliver ourselves without remorse from life itself, once it has become an

ill for us; since it is within our power to do so, and since in doing so we offend neither God nor men. If something must be sacrificed to the Supreme Being, is dying nothing? Let us offer to God the death he imposes on us through the voice of reason, and commit peacefully to his bosom our soul which he reclaims from us.

Such are the general precepts that good sense dictates to all men and Religion sanctions.* Let us return to us. You have been willing to open your heart to me; I know your sufferings; you suffer no less than I; your ills like mine are without remedy, and all the more since the laws of honor are more immutable than those of fortune. You endure them, I concede, steadfastly. Virtue sustains you; one step farther; it releases you. You urge me to suffer: Milord, I dare urge you to put an end to your sufferings, and I let you be the judge which of us cherishes the other more.

Why postpone taking a step that must in any case be taken? Shall we wait until old age and years attach us basely to life after taking away its charms, and until we trail about with effort, ignominy, and pain a body crippled and bent over? We are at the age when the soul's vigor easily releases itself from its fetters, and when man still knows how to die; later on he wailingly lets life be wrested from him. Let us take advantage of a time when the weariness of life makes death desirable; let us beware lest it come with its horrors at the moment when we no longer want it. I remember, there was a moment when I asked Heaven for but an hour, and would have died of despair had I not obtained it. Ah how painful it is to break the ties that bind our hearts to earth, and how wise it is to give it up as soon as they are broken! I can feel, Milord, that we are both worthy of a dwelling more pure; virtue points us the way, and fate beckons us to seek it. May the friendship that joins us unite us once more in our last hour. O what ecstasy for two true friends to end their days willingly in each other's arms, to mingle their last sighs, breathe forth at once the two halves of their soul! What pain, what regret can poison their last instants? What do they leave behind in departing the world? They go off together; they leave nothing behind.

Reply

Young man, you are being carried away by a blind transport; restrain yourself; do not give counsel while you are seeking it. I have known other ills than yours. My soul is staunch; I am an Englishman, I know how to die, for I know how to live, to suffer like a man. I have seen death at close range, and consider it with too much detachment to go seeking it out. Let us talk about you.

It is true, you were necessary to me; my soul needed yours; your assistance could prove useful to me; your reason could possibly enlighten me in the most importance concern of my life; if I make no use of it, whose fault do you think that is? Where is it? What has become of it? What can you do? What good are you in your present condition? What services can I expect from you?

* The strange letter for the deliberation in question! Does one reason so peacefully over such a question, when one examines it for oneself? Is the letter a fabrication, or does the Author want nothing more than to be refuted? What could be grounds for doubt is the example of Robeck he cites, and which seems to furnish him a precedent. Robeck deliberated so soberly that he had the patience to write a book, a big book, a good long, ponderous, cold book, and once he had established, as he saw it, that is was permissible to take one's own life, he did so with the same tranquillity. Let us be wary of prejudices of period and nation. When killing oneself is not in fashion, one imagines that only crazy people kill themselves; all acts of courage are so many fancies to feeble souls; every man judges the others only by himself. Yet have we not many attested examples of men wise on every other count, who, without remorse, without fury, without despair, relinquish life solely because it is a burden to them, and die more tranquilly than they have lived.

Unreasonable sorrows render you dumb and merciless. You are not a man; you are nothing; and if I did not take into account what you are capable of being, such as you are I see nothing in this world beneath you.

The only proof I need is your Letter itself. Formerly I found sense, truth in you. Your sentiments were straightforward, your reasoning was clear, and I loved you not only by affinity but by choice as another means for me to cultivate wisdom. What have I now found in the reasoning's of this Letter you seem so smug about? A miserable and perpetual sophism which by the distractions of your reason indicates those of your heart, and which I would not even bother pointing out had I not taken pity on your ranting.

To overthrow all that in a word, I need ask you only one thing. You who believe in God's existence, the soul's immortality, and man's freedom, do not think, no doubt, that an intelligent being receives a body and is placed on earth at random, merely to live, suffer, and die? There is indeed, perhaps, in human life a goal, an end, a moral objective? I beg you to answer me clearly on this point; after which we will take up your letter step by step, and you will blush for having written it. . . .

. . . So you are entitled to cease to live? What I would like to know is whether you have even begun? What! Were you placed on earth to do nothing here? Did Heaven not assign to you along with life a task to fill it? If you have done your day's work before evening, rest for what remains of the day, that you can do; but let us have a look at how much you have accomplished. What answer do you have ready for the Supreme Judge who will ask for an account of your time? Speak up, what will you tell him? I have seduced an honest maiden. I abandon a friend amidst his troubles. Poor fool! Find me that righteous man who boasts he has lived enough; let me learn from him how one must have borne life so as to have the right to relinquished it.

You enumerate humanity's ills. You do not blush at exhausting commonplaces rehashed a hundred times, and you say: life is an evil. But, look about, search in the order of things, whether you can find in it any good things that are not admixed with evil. . . . You tire of living, and you say: life is an evil. Sooner or later you will be consoled, and you will say: life is good. You will be closer to the truth without reasoning any better: for nothing will have changed but you. That being so, change right away, and since all the evil is in the ill disposition of your soul, amend your disorderly affections, and do not burn your house down to avoid the bother of putting it in order.

. . . You suffer, you must seek to put an end to your suffering. Let us examine whether that calls for dying.

. . . since most of our physical ills only increase endlessly, excruciating bodily pain, when it is incurable, may justify a man's disposing of himself: for all his faculties being estranged by pain, and the evil being without remedy, he no longer has use of either his will or his reason; he ceases to be a man before he dies, and by taking his own life merely completes the separation from a body that bogs him down and where already his soul no longer is.

But such is not the case with pains of the soul, which, however acute, always bring the remedy with them. Indeed, what makes any ill intolerable? It is its duration. The operations of surgery are commonly much more cruel than the sufferings they heal; but the ill's pain is permanent, the operation's temporary, and we prefer the latter. What need is there then for an operation for pains that are assuaged by their own duration, which alone would make them unbearable? Is it reasonable to apply such violent remedies to ills that fade away by themselves? To anyone who prizes constancy and avoids valuing years more than they are worth, which of two means of

delivering himself from the same sufferings is to be preferred, death or time? Wait and you will be healed. What more do you ask? . . .

. . . Think about that, young man; what are ten, twenty, thirty years to an immortal being? Pain and pleasure pass like a shadow; life is gone in an instant; it is nothing in itself, its worth depends on its use. The good one has done alone remains, and it is through it that life amounts to something.

Therefore say no more that for you it is an evil to live, since it is in your power alone to make it a good, and if it is an evil to have lived, that is another reason to live on. Do not say, either, that you are entitled to die; for it would be as good to say that you are entitled not to be a man, entitled to rebel against the author of your being, and betray your purpose. But when you add that your death does no one harm, are you forgetting that it is to your friend you dare to say this?

Your death does no one harm? I see! To die at our expense hardly matters to you, you count our mourning for nothing. I am not talking now about the rights of friendship, which you dismiss; are there not yet dearer ones* that oblige you to preserve yourself? If there is one person on earth who has loved you enough not to wish to survive you, and whose happiness is incomplete without yours, do you think you owe her nothing? . . . Ungrateful friend, indelicate lover, will you always be preoccupied with yourself? Will you never be mindful of anything but your pains? Are you not at all sensible to the happiness of that which you cherished? And could you not manage to live for her who intended to die with you?

You mention the duties of the magistrate and paterfamilias, and because they are not imposed on you, you think you are completely uncommitted. How about society to which you owe your preservation, your talents, your lights; the fatherland to which you belong, the wretched who need you, do you owe them nothing? Oh what an impeccable enumeration you make! Among the duties you count, you forget only those of man and Citizen. . . .

. . . You try to justify yourself with examples. You dare to cite me Romans! You, Romans! Some right you have to dare pronounce those illustrious names! Tell me, did Brutus die a desperate lover, and did Cato rip out his entrails for his mistress? Petty, feeble man, what is shared between Cato and you? Show me the common measure between that sublime soul and yours. Brash fellow, hush! I fear profaning his name by eulogizing him. Before that holy and august name, every friend of virtue ought to bury his forehead in the dust, and honor in silence the memory of the greatest of men.

How ill chosen your examples are, and what low esteem you hold Romans in, if you think they believed they were entitled to take their lives as soon as they seemed onerous. Look at the prime of the Republic, and see whether you will find there a single virtuous citizen delivering himself thus from the weight of his duties, even after the cruellest of misfortunes. Did Regulus returning to Carthage avert by his death the torments that awaited him? What would Posthumius not have given to enjoy that resource at the Caudine Forks? What effort of courage did the Senate itself not admire in the Consul Varro for having managed to survive his defeat? For what reason did so many Generals willingly allow themselves to be delivered to their enemies, they to whom ignominy was so cruel, and to whom dying was of so little price? It is because they owed their blood, their lives, and their last breath to the fatherland, and because

* Rights dearer than those of the friendship? And it is a sage who says this! But this putative sage was himself in love.

neither shame nor setbacks could turn them aside from that sacred duty. But when the Laws were abolished and the State was a prey to Tyrants, the Citizens reclaimed their natural liberty and their rights over themselves. When Rome was no longer, it was permissible for Romans to cease to exist; they had fulfilled their functions on earth, they had lost their fatherland, they were entitled to dispose of themselves, and restore to themselves the liberty they could no longer restore to their country. After using their life in the service of expiring Rome and fighting for law, they died virtuous and great as they had lived, and their death was yet another tribute to the glory of the Roman name, that in none of them should be held up the unworthy spectacle of true Citizens serving a usurper.

But you, who are you? What have you done? Do you think your obscurity is an excuse? Does your weakness exempt you from your duties, and does having neither name nor rank in your Fatherland make you less subject to its laws? Some right you have to dare speak of dying while you owe the use of your life to your fellow men! Know that a death such as you contemplate is dishonorable and devious. It is a larceny committed against mankind. Before you take your leave of it, give it back what it has done for you. But I have no attachments? I am of no use to the world? Philosopher for a day! Have you not learned that you could not take a step on earth without finding some duty to fulfill, and that every man is useful to humanity, by the very fact that he exist?

Listen to me, mad youth; you are dear to me; I pity your errors. If you still have deep in your heart the least sentiment of virtue, come, let me teach you to love life. Every time you are tempted to exit it, say to yourself: "Let me do one more good deed before I die." Then go find someone needy to assist, someone unfortunate to console, someone oppressed to defend. Reconcile me with the wretched who are too intimidated to approach me; do not fear to squander either my purse or my influence: help yourself; exhaust my fortune, make me rich. If this consideration hold you back today, it will hold you back again tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, your whole life long. If it does not; die, you are nothing but an evil man.

WILLIAM BLACKSTONE (1723–1780)

from *Commentaries on the Laws of England*

Sir William Blackstone was born in London to a wealthy family of the middle class and received a broad education in logic, mathematics, and the classics. A member and fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, he became a barrister in 1746 after studying at the Middle Temple. His practice went badly, and he subsequently devoted himself to teaching at Oxford in 1753, three years after receiving the Doctor in Civil Law degree. His lectures on English law were the first ever presented in a university setting. Blackstone later abandoned academic life in favor of a political one. From 1761 until 1770, he served in the House of Commons as a member of Parliament while continuing to practice law, and in 1763, was made solicitor general to the queen. In 1770, Blackstone became judge of the Court of Common Pleas, a position he held until his death.

While Blackstone's work was criticized for frequently being inaccurate, uncritical, and simplistic, his historical importance resides in the ability he had to explain and describe to the layman, in simple and elegant terms, the complexities of English law. He was often criticized, especially by the reformist Jeremy Bentham [q.v.], for his view that dissent in law was a crime, since civil laws are valid due to their harmony with the laws of nature and God.

Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England *(1765–1769) were the first attempt, since Henri de Bracton [q.v.] in the 13th century, to describe the doctrines of English law in a comprehensive and systematic manner. The enormously influential* Commentaries, *published in four volumes, became the basis of the university system of legal education in both England and the United States. In the section "Homicide," Blackstone characterizes suicide as "among the highest crimes" and an act of cowardice, and outlines possible punishments of suicides by the law.*

Sources

Sir William Blackstone, "Of Homicide," Book IV, chapter XIV, section III, of *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 volumes, 18th edition, ed. Archer Ryland. London: Sweet, Pheney, Maxwell, Stevens & Sons, 1829, pp. 188–190. Also from the Avalon Project at Yale Law School at http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/blackstone.

from COMMENTARIES ON THE LAWS OF ENGLAND

Homicide

Felonious homicide is . . . the killing of a human creature, of any age or sex, without justification or excuse. This may be done, either by killing one's self, or another man.

Self-murder, the pretended heroism, but real cowardice, of the Stoic philosophers, who destroyed themselves to avoid those ills which they had not the fortitude to endure, though the attempting it seems to be countenanced by the civil law, yet was punished by the Athenian law with cutting off the hand, which committed the desperate deed. And also the law of England wisely and religiously considers, that no man hath a power to destroy life, but by commission from God, the author of it: and, as the suicide is guilty of a double offence; one spiritual, in invading the prerogative of the Almighty, and rushing into his immediate presence uncalled for; the other temporal, against the king, who hath an interest in the preservation of all his subjects; the law has therefore ranked this among the highest, crimes, making it a peculiar species of felony, a felony committed on one's self. . . . A *felo de se* therefore is he that deliberately puts an end to his own existence, or commits any unlawful malicious act, the consequence of which is his own death: as if, attempting to kill another, he runs upon his antagonist's sword; or, shooting at another, the gun bursts and kills himself. The party must be of years of discretion, and in his senses, else it is no crime. But this excuse ought not to be strained to that length, to which our coroners' juries are apt to carry it, *viz*. that the very act of suicide is an evidence of insanity; as if every man who acts contrary to reason, had no reason at all: for the same argument would prove every other criminal *non compos*, as well as the self-murderer. The law very rationally judges,

that every melancholy or hypochondriac fit does not deprive a man of the capacity of discerning right from wrong; which is necessary, as was observed in a former chapter, to form a legal excuse. And therefore, if a real lunatic kills himself in a lucid interval, he is a *felo de se* as much as another man.

But now the question follows, what punishment can human laws inflict on one who has withdrawn himself from their reach? They can only act upon what he has left behind him, his reputation and fortune: on the former by an ignominious burial in the highway, with a stake driven through his body; on the latter, by a forfeiture of all his goods and chattels to the king: hoping that his care for either his own reputation, or the welfare of his family, would be some motive to restrain him from so desperate and wicked an act. And it is observable, that this forfeiture has relation to the time of the act done in the felon's lifetime, which was the cause of his death. As if husband and wife be possessed jointly of a term of years in land, and the husband drowns himself; the land shall be forfeited to the king, and the wife shall not have it by survivorship. For by the act of casting himself into the water he forfeits the term; which gives a title to the king, prior to the wife's title by survivorship, which could not accrue till the instant of her husband's death. And, though it must be owned that the letter of the law herein borders a little upon severity, yet it is some alleviation that the power of mitigation is left in the breast of the sovereign, who upon this (as on all other occasions) is reminded by the oath of his office to execute judgment in mercy.

PAUL-HENRI THIRY, BARON D'HOLBACH (1723–1789)

from *The System of Nature* (expanded in Archive)

Baron d'Holbach was born Paul Heinrich Dietrich (later Thiry) of German parentage, but was raised and educated by an uncle who had made his fortune in France. With his uncle's death, Holbach inherited his fortune and name, and in 1749, he was naturalized as a French citizen. He was a philosopher, polemicist, and man of leisure whose home in Paris became the base for the philosophes *of the 18th-century Enlightenment, including d'Alembert, Rousseau, and Diderot. He contributed some 376 articles, mostly on science, to Diderot's* Encyclopedia, *and published* The System of Nature *(1770) and* Good Sense *(1772) among other works. Throughout his life, Holbach wrote and contributed to over 50 books. He did not leave behind any personal correspondence, and most of his writings were published under various pseudonyms because of their subversive content; to maintain secrecy, he published* Christianity Unveiled *(1761), a critical examination of Christianity, under the name of a deceased friend.*

Holbach's philosophy was materialistic and atheistic, a view that was shaped by his studies in the earth sciences. He wrote militant polemics against religion, the contents of which expressed most of the

arguments for unbelief at the time. Organized religion, according to Holbach, is superstitious, intolerant, greedy, unreasonable, and the primary cause of man's suffering. He also largely rejected myth, though recognizing it as a comparatively harmless personification of natural powers in contrast to the fatal errors of theologians who separated off such powers as "God." Holbach posited an ethical system based on materialistic grounds, in which man, like a machine, is devoid of free will.

In his most popular book, The System of Nature, *first published under the pseudonym Mirabaud, Holbach attacks the religious position that would have people suffer for a lifetime without the possibility of mitigation by suicide, an "impulse of nature." According to Holbach, a person whose life has been refused the pleasures of living by "unknown" deterministic causes "already exists no longer." In opposition to the then-prevalent view that individuals had obligations to the king or to society not to kill themselves, Holbach argues that the society which "has not the ability or . . . is not willing to procure man any one benefit" has no hold on him, "loses all its rights over him," and thus cannot object to his suicide.*

Source

Paul-Henri Dietrich, Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature; or the Laws of the Moral and Physical World*, Ch. XIII, "Of Education-Morality & Laws Sufficient to Restrain Man-Desire of Immortality-Suicide," Appendix, Ch. XIV (1770). Tr. Samuel Wilkinson, 1820–21. Available from Project Gutenberg, release # 8909, at www.gutenberg.org, including material in introduction from Robert D. Richardson Jr.

from THE SYSTEM OF NATURE

Man in different ages, in different countries, has formed opinions extremely various upon the conduct of those, who have had the temerity to put an end to their own existence. His ideas upon this subject, as upon all others, have taken their tone from his religion, have been governed by his superstitious systems, have been modified by his political institutions. The Greeks, the Romans, and other nations, which every thing conspired to make intrepid, to render courageous, to lead to magnanimity, regarded as heroes, contemplated as Gods, those who voluntarily cut the thread of life. In Hindoostan, the Brahmin yet knows how to inspire even women with sufficient fortitude to burn themselves upon the dead bodies of their husbands. The Japanese, upon the most trifling occasion, takes no kind of difficulty in plunging a dagger into his bosom.

Among the people of our own country, religion renders man less prodigal of life; it teaches that it is offensive to the Deity that he should destroy himself. Some moralists, abstracting the height of religious ideas, have held that it is never permitted to man to break the conditions of the covenant that he has made with society. Others have looked upon suicide as cowardice; they have thought that it was weakness, that it displayed pusillanimity, to suffer, himself to be overwhelmed with the shafts of his destiny; and have held that there would be much more courage, more elevation of soul, in supporting his afflictions, in resisting the blows of fate.

If nature be consulted upon this point, it will be found that all the actions of man, that feeble plaything in the hands of necessity, are indispensable; that they depend on causes which move him in despite of himself—that without his knowledge, make him accomplish at each moment of his existence some one of its decrees. If the same power that obliges all intelligent beings to cherish their existence, renders that of man so painful, so cruel, that he finds it insupportable he quits his species; order is destroyed for him, he accomplishes a decree of Nature, that wills he shall no longer exist. This Nature has laboured during thousands of years, to form in the bowels of the earth the iron that must number his days.

If the relation of man with Nature be examined, it will be found that his engagement was neither voluntary on his part, nor reciprocal on the part of Nature. The volition of his will had no share in his birth; it is commonly against his will that he is obliged to finish life; his actions are, as we have proved, only the necessary effects of unknown causes which determine his will. He is, in the hands of Nature, that which a sword is in his own hands; he can fall upon it without its being able to accuse him with breaking his engagements; or of stamping with ingratitude the hand that holds it: man can only love his existence on condition of being happy; as soon as the entire of nature refuses him this happiness; as soon as all that surrounds him becomes incommodious to him, as soon as his melancholy ideas offer nothing but afflicting pictures to his imagination; he already exists no longer; he is suspended in the void; he quits a rank which no longer suits him; in which he finds no one interest; which offers him no protection; which overwhelms him with calamity; in which he can no more be useful either to himself or to others.

If the covenant which unites man to society be considered, it will be obvious that every contract is conditional, must be reciprocal; that is to say, supposes mutual advantages between the contracting parties. The citizen cannot be bound to his country, to his associates, but by the bonds of happiness.

Are these bonds cut asunder? He is restored to liberty. Society, or those who represent it, do they use him with harshness, do they treat him with injustice, do they render his existence painful? Does disgrace hold him out to the finger of scorn; does indigence menace him in an obdurate world? Perfidious friends, do they forsake him in adversity? An unfaithful wife, does she outrage his heart? Rebellious, ungrateful children, do they afflict his old age? Has he placed his happiness exclusively on some object which it is impossible for him to procure? Chagrin, remorse, melancholy, and despair, have they disfigured to him the spectacle of the universe? In short, for whatever cause it may be: if he is not able to support his evils, he quits a world, which from henceforth, is for him only a frightful desert. He removes himself for ever from a country he thinks no longer willing to reckon him amongst the number of her children—he quits a house that to his mind is ready to bury him under its ruins—he renounces a society, to the happiness of which he can no longer contribute; which his own peculiar felicity alone can render dear to him: and could the man be blamed, who, finding himself useless; who being without resources, in the town where destiny gave him birth, should quit it in chagrin, to plunge himself in solitude? Death appears to the wretched the only remedy for despair; it is then the sword seems the only friend, the only comfort that is left to the unhappy: as long as hope remains the tenant of his bosom—as long as his evils appear to him at all supportable—as long as he flatters himself with seeing them brought to a termination—as long as he finds some comfort in existence, however slender, he will not consent to deprive himself of life: but when nothing any longer sustains

in him the love of this existence, then to live, is to him the greatest of evils; to die, the only mode by which he can avoid the excess of despair. This has been the opinion of many great men: Seneca, the moralist, whom Lactantius calls the divine Pagan, who has been praised equally by St. Austin and St. Augustine, endeavours by every kind of argument to make death a matter of indifference to man. Cato has always been commended, because he would not survive the cause of liberty; for that he would not live a slave. Curtius, who rode voluntarily into the gap, to save his country, has always been held forth as a model of heroic virtue. Is it not evident, that those martyrs who have delivered themselves up to punishment, have preferred quitting the world to living in it contrary to their own ideals of happiness? When Samson wished to be revenged on the Philistines, did he not consent to die with them as the only means? If our country is attacked, do we not voluntarily sacrifice our lives in its defence?

That society who has not the ability, or who is not willing to procure man any one benefit, loses all its rights over him; Nature, when it has rendered his existence completely miserable, has in fact, ordered him to quit it: in dying he does no more than fulfil one of her decrees, as he did when he first drew his breath. To him who is fearless of death, there is no evil without a remedy; for him who refuses to die, there yet exists benefits which attach him to the world; in this case let him rally his powers—let him oppose courage to a destiny that oppresses him—let him call forth those resources with which Nature yet furnishes him; she cannot have totally abandoned him, while she yet leaves him the sensation of pleasure; the hopes of seeing a period to his pains. . . .

. . . As life is commonly the greatest blessing for man, it is to be presumed that he who deprives himself of it, is compelled to it by an invincible force. It is the excess of misery, the height of despair, the derangement of his brain, caused by melancholy, that urges man on to destroy himself. Agitated by contrary impulsions, he is, as we have before said, obliged to follow a middle course that conducts him to his death; if man be not a free-agent, in any one instant of his life, he is again much less so in the act by which it is terminated.

It will be seen then, that he who kills himself, does not, as it is pretended, commit an outrage on nature. He follows an impulse which has deprived him of reason; adopts the only means left him to quit his anguish; he goes out of a door which she leaves open to him; he cannot offend in accomplishing a law of necessity: the iron hand of this having broken the spring that renders life desirable to him; which urged him to self-conservation, shews him he ought to quit a rank or system where he finds himself too miserable to have the desire of remaining. His country or his family have no right to complain of a member, whom it has no means of rendering happy; from whom consequently they have nothing more to hope: to be useful to either, it is necessary he should cherish his own peculiar existence; that he should have an interest in conserving himself—that he should love the bonds by which he is united to others—that he should be capable of occupying himself with their felicity—that he should have a sound mind. That the suicide should repent of his precipitancy, he should outlive himself, he should carry with him into his future residence, his organs, his senses, his memory, his ideas, his actual mode of existing, his determinate manner of thinking.

In short, nothing is more useful for society, than to inspire man with a contempt for death; to banish from his mind the false ideas he has of its consequences. The fear of death can never do more than make cowards; the fear of its consequences will make nothing but fanatics or melancholy beings, who are useless to themselves, unprofitable to others. Death is a resource that ought not by any means to be taken away from oppressed virtue; which the injustice of

man frequently reduces to despair. If man feared death less, he would neither be a slave nor superstitious; truth would find defenders more zealous; the rights of mankind would be more hardily sustained; virtue would be intrepidly upheld: error would be more powerfully opposed; tyranny would be banished from nations: cowardice nourishes it, fear perpetuates it. In fact, *man can neither be contented nor happy whilst his opinions shall oblige him to tremble.*

IMMANUEL KANT (1724–1804)

from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

from *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue: Man's Duty to Himself Insofar as He Is an Animal Being* **(expanded in Archive)**

from *Lectures on Ethics: Duties Towards the Body in Regard to Life*

Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (today Kaliningrad, Russia), to a devoutly religious Lutheran Pietist family. At the age of 16, he entered the University of Königsberg, initially to study theology, and later to read natural science and philosophy. During this period of his life, Kant was influenced by the thought of the German rationalist Christian Wolff, as well as by Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton. He left the university after the death of his father to work as a private tutor. He returned, however, in 1755, and within the next year, completed his degree and was made a lecturer. For the next 15 years, he published primarily scientific works, many critical of Leibniz and Wolff; between 1770 and 1780, he published very little. He had come to be influenced by Hume and Rousseau as well. Kant was 57 when he published his famous Critique of Pure Reason *(1781), which attempted to resolve the conflict between rationalism and empiricism—between the view that knowledge is a priori or innate and the view that it is attained solely by sense perception. This first* Critique *sought to ascertain the limits of human reason. Kant also held that practical reason, unlike speculative reason, could be used to understand moral problems: in his* Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals *(1785) and in the second* Critique*—the* Critique of Practical Reason *(1788)—he attempted to work out a rational principle of morality.* The Critique of Judgment *(1790), the third* Critique*, addressed teleological and aesthetic judgment. Subsequently, he published* Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone *(1793),* Towards Perpetual Peace *(1795), and the* Metaphysics of Morals *(1797).*

In his works on ethics, Kant argues that an act can be held to be good if it is done in accord with duty, at the dictate of the good will, and that the "Categorical Imperative" can be employed by the

rational agent to determine what is in accord with duty; an action is moral only if one could will without contradiction that it be universal law.

Three selections from Kant's ethical writings are included here. In the first selection, from the Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals *(also called the* Prolegomena *or* Groundwork*), Kant demonstrates how it is possible to show that suicide is inherently wrong. He uses suicide as an illustration of the kind of action that cannot satisfy the Categorical Imperative, since one could not, without contradiction, will that committing suicide be universal law. To put it another way, under an alternative formulation of the Categorical Imperative, it is not possible to commit suicide and yet still treat oneself as an end in oneself (as morality requires that one treat all humanity), not just as a means only. In* The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, Kant raises a number of "casuistical questions"—moral dilemmas that explore and challenge the theoretical account he has given. One of them concerns "a great, recently deceased monarch" (Frederick the Great), who in fact always carried poison with him in war. Frederick actually did contemplate suicide with poison on several occasions and came closest to using it on August 12, 1759, at Kunnersdorf, when he led 43,000 troops into battle against the Russians and Austrians but lost 19,000 men; just 3,000 were left as an organized force by nightfall. In a related situation two years earlier, Frederick had said, ". . . nothing is left for me but trying the last extremity . . . and if we cannot conquer, we must all of us have ourselves killed."*

In the Lectures on Ethics*, Kant discusses several of the suicides celebrated by the Roman Stoics—Cato, Lucretia, and briefly, Atticus. Although acknowledging that Cato's suicide is a virtue and that appearances are in its favor, Kant insists that it is the only such example. Kant continues on to argue that while one must not kill oneself, nevertheless in some circumstances, one must be prepared to give life up in order to have lived honorably and "not disgrace the dignity of humanity."*

Kant died in Königsberg at the age of nearly 80. He never traveled more than a few dozen miles from the city.

Sources

Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section; and *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (Part II of the *Metaphysics of Morals*), I. *The Elements of Ethics*, First Part, First Book, First Chapter: "Man's Duty to Himself Insofar as He Is an Animal Being," both in Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, Tr. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983, pp. 23–24, 26, 30–31, 35–36; 82–85; *Lectures on Ethics*, Tr. Louis Infield. New York: Harper & Row, 1978, pp. 147–157. Passages on Frederick the Great in biographical note are from *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, ed. and tr. Jay Luvaas (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 9, 224, 242.

from GROUNDING FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS

Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to his conception of laws, i.e., according to principles, and thereby has he a will. . . . The representation of an objective principle insofar as it necessitates the will is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative. There is one imperative which

immediately commands a certain conduct without having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by it. This imperative is categorical. It is not concerned with the matter of the action and its intended result, but rather with the form of the action and the principle from which it follows; what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may. This imperative may be called that of morality. . . .

Hence there is only one categorical imperative and it is this: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. . . .

The universality of law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense (as to form), i.e., the existence of things as far as determined by universal laws. Accordingly, the universal imperative of duty may be expressed thus: Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.

We shall now enumerate some duties, following the usual division of them into duties to ourselves and to others and into perfect and imperfect duties:

1. A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes feels sick of life but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether taking his own life would not be contrary to his duty to himself. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is this: from self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction. There only remains the question as to whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. One sees at once a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would destroy life by means of the very same feeling that acts so as to stimulate the furtherance of life, and hence there could be no existence as a system of nature. Therefore, such a maxim cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is, consequently, wholly opposed to the supreme principle of all duty. . . .

Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. He must in all his actions whether directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end. . . . Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature have, nevertheless, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are therefore called things. On the other hand, rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves, i.e., as something which is not to be used merely as means and hence there is imposed thereby a limit on all arbitrary use of such beings, which are thus objects of respect. Persons are, therefore, not merely subjective ends, whose existence as an effect of our actions has a value for us; but such beings are objective ends, i.e., exist as ends in themselves. . . .

If then there is to be a supreme practical principle and, as far as the human will is concerned, a categorical imperative, then it must be such that from the conception of what is necessarily an end for everyone because this end is an end in itself it constitutes an objective principle of the will and can hence serve as a practical law. The ground of such a principle is this: rational nature exists as an end in itself. In this way man necessarily thinks of his own existence; thus far is it a subjective principle of human actions. But in this way also does every other rational being think of his existence on the same rational ground that holds also for me; hence it is at the same time an objective principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, all laws of the will must be able to be derived. The practical imperative will therefore be the following: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means. We now want to see whether this can be carried out in practice.

Let us keep to our previous examples.

First, as regards the concept of necessary duty to oneself, the man who contemplates suicide will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from a difficult situation, then he is making use of his person merely as a means so as to maintain a tolerable condition till the end of his life. Man, however, is not a thing and hence is not something to be used merely as a means; he must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in himself. Therefore, I cannot dispose of man in my own person by mutilating, damaging, or killing him.

from THE METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES OF VIRTUE

MAN'S DUTY TO HIMSELF INSOFAR AS HE IS AN ANIMAL BEING

The first, though not the principal, duty of man to himself as an animal being is the preservation of himself in his animal nature.

The opposite of such self-preservation is the deliberate or intentional destruction of one's animal nature, and this destruction can be thought of as either total or partial. Total destruction is called suicide (*autochiria; suicidium*); partial can be subdivided into material, as when one deprives himself of certain integral parts (organs) by dismembering or by mutilating, and into formal, as when he deprives himself (forever or for a while) of the physical (and hence indirectly also the moral) use of his powers, i.e., self-stupefaction.

Since this chapter is concerned only with negative duties, i.e., duties of omission, the articles of duty must be directed against the vices which oppose duties one has to himself.

Concerning Suicide

The deliberate killing of oneself can be called *self-murder* (*homocidium dolosum* ["deceptive murder"]) only when it can be shown that the killing is really a crime committed either against one's own person, or against another person through one's own suicide (e.g., when a pregnant person kills herself).

Suicide is a crime (murder). To be sure, suicide can also be held to be a transgression of one's duty to other men, as, for instance, the transgression of the duty of one of a married couple to the other, of parents to children, of a subject to his government or to his fellow citizens, and, finally, of man to God by forsaking the station entrusted to him in this world without being recalled from it. However, we are here concerned with nothing but the violation of a duty to oneself, with whether, if I set aside all the aforementioned considerations concerning one's duty to other men, a man is still obligated to preserve his life simply because he is a person and must therefore recognize a duty to himself (and a strict one at that).

It seems absurd that a man can injure himself (*volenti non fit injuria*). The Stoic therefore considered it a prerogative of his personality as a wise man to walk out of this life with an undisturbed mind whenever he liked (as out of a smoke-filled room), not because he was

afflicted by actual or anticipated ills, but simply because he could make use of nothing more in this life. And yet this very courage, this strength of mind—of not fearing death and of knowing of something which man can prize more highly than his life—ought to have been an ever so much greater motive for him not to destroy himself, a being having such authoritative superiority over the strongest sensible incentives; consequently, it ought to have been a motive for him not to deprive himself of life.

Man cannot deprive himself of his personality so long as one speaks of duties, thus so long as he lives. That man ought to have the authorization to withdraw himself from all obligation, i.e., to be free to act as if no authorization at all were required for this withdrawal, involves a contradiction. To destroy the subject of morality in his own person is tantamount to obliterating from the world, as far as he can, the very existence of morality itself; but morality is, nevertheless, an end in itself. Accordingly, to dispose of oneself as a mere means to some end of one's own liking is to degrade the humanity in one's person (*homo noumenon*), which, after all, was entrusted to man (*homo phaenomenon*) to preserve. . . .

Casuistical Questions

Is it self-murder to plunge oneself into certain death (like Curtius) in order to save one's country? Or is martyrdom—the deliberate sacrifice of oneself for the good of mankind—also to be regarded, like the former case, as a heroic deed?

Is committing suicide permitted in anticipation of an unjust death sentence from one's superior? Even if the sovereign permitted such a suicide (as Nero permitted of Seneca)?

Can one attribute a criminal intention to a great, recently deceased monarch (Frederick the Great) because he carried a fast-acting poison with him, presumably so that if he was captured in war (which he always conducted personally), he might not be forced to submit to conditions of ransom which might be harmful to his country? (For he can be credited with such a purpose without one's being required to presume that he carried the poison out of mere arrogance.)

Bitten by a mad dog, a man already felt hydrophobia coming upon him. He declared that since he had never known anybody cured of it, he would destroy himself in order that, as he said in his testament, he might not in his madness (which he already felt gripping him) bring misfortune to other men too. The question is whether or not he did wrong.

from LECTURES ON ETHICS

DUTIES TOWARDS THE BODY IN REGARD TO LIFE

What are our powers of disposal over our life? Have we any authority of disposal over it in any shape or form? How far is it incumbent upon us to take care of it? These are questions which fall to be considered in connexion with our duties towards the body in regard to life. We must, however, by way of introduction, make the following observations. If the body were related to life not as a condition but as an accident or circumstance so that we could at

will divest ourselves of it; if we could slip out of it and slip into another just as we leave one country for another, then the body would be subject to our free will and we could rightly have the disposal of it. This, however, would not imply that we could similarly dispose of our life, but only of our circumstances, of the movable goods, the furniture of life. In fact, however, our life is entirely conditioned by our body, so that we cannot conceive of a life not mediated by the body and we cannot make use of our freedom except through the body. It is, therefore, obvious that the body constitutes a part of ourselves. If a man destroys his body, and so his life, he does it by the use of his will, which is itself destroyed in the process. But to use the power of a free will for its own destruction is self-contradictory. If freedom is the condition of life it cannot be employed to abolish life and so to destroy and abolish itself. To use life for its own destruction, to use life for producing lifelessness, is self-contradictory. These preliminary remarks are sufficient to show that man cannot rightly have any power of disposal in regard to himself and his life, but only in regard to his circumstances. His body gives man power over his life; were he a spirit he could not destroy his life; life in the absolute has been invested by nature with indestructibility and is an end in itself; hence it follows that man cannot have the power to dispose of his life.

Suicide

Suicide can be regarded in various lights; it might be held to be reprehensible, or permissible, or even heroic. In the first place we have the specious view that suicide can be allowed and tolerated. Its advocates argue thus. So long as he does not violate the proprietary rights of others, man is a free agent. With regard to his body there are various things he can properly do; he can have a boil lanced or a limb amputated, and disregard a scar; he is, in fact, free to do whatever he may consider useful and advisable. If then he comes to the conclusion that the most useful and advisable thing that he can do is to put an end to his life, why should he not be entitled to do so? Why not, if he sees that he can no longer go on living and that he will be ridding himself of misfortune, torment and disgrace? To be sure he robs himself of a full life, but he escapes once and for all from calamity and misfortune. The argument sounds most plausible. But let us, leaving aside religious considerations, examine the act itself. We may treat our body as we please, provided our motives are those of self-preservation. If, for instance, his foot is a hindrance to life, a man might have it amputated. To preserve his person he has the right of disposal over his body. But in taking his life he does not preserve his person; he disposes of his person and not of its attendant circumstances; he robs himself of his person. This is contrary to the highest duty we have towards ourselves, for it annuls the condition of all other duties; it goes beyond the limits of the use of free will, for this use is possible only through the existence of the Subject.

There is another set of considerations which make suicide seem plausible. A man might find himself so placed that he can continue living only under circumstances which deprive life of all value; in which he can no longer live conformably to virtue and prudence, so that he must from noble motives put an end to his life. The advocates of this view quote in support of it the example of Cato. Cato knew that the entire Roman nation relied upon him in their resistance to Caesar, but he found that he could not prevent himself from falling into Caesar's hands. What was he to do? If he, the champion of freedom, submitted, every one would say, "If Cato himself submits, what else can we do?" If, on the other hand, he killed himself, his death might spur on the

Romans to fight to the bitter end in defence of their freedom. So he killed himself. He thought that it was necessary for him to die. He thought that if he could not go on living as Cato, he could not go on living at all. It must certainly be admitted that in a case such as this, where suicide is a virtue, appearances are in its favour. But this is the only example which has given the world the opportunity of defending suicide. It is the only example of its kind and there has been no similar case since. Lucretia also killed herself, but on grounds of modesty and in a fury of vengeance. It is obviously our duty to preserve our honour, particularly in relation to the opposite sex, for whom it is a merit; but we must endeavour to save our honour only to this extent, that we ought not to surrender it for selfish and lustful purposes. To do what Lucretia did is to adopt a remedy which is not at our disposal; it would have been better had she defended her honour unto death; that would not have been suicide and would have been right; for it is no suicide to risk one's life against one's enemies, and even to sacrifice it, in order to observe one's duties towards oneself.

No one under the sun can bind me to commit suicide; no sovereign can do so. The sovereign can call upon his subjects to fight to the death for their country, and those who fall on the field of battle are not suicides, but the victims of fate. Not only is this not suicide; but the opposite, a faint heart and fear of the death which threatens by the necessity of fate, is no true self-preservation; for he who runs away to save his own life, and leaves his comrades in the lurch, is a coward; but he who defends himself and his fellows even unto death is no suicide, but noble and high-minded; for life is not to be highly regarded for its own sake. I should endeavour to preserve my own life only so far as I am worthy to live. We must draw a distinction between the suicide and the victim of fate. A man who shortens his life by intemperance is guilty of imprudence and indirectly of his own death; but his guilt is not direct; he did not intend to kill himself; his death was not premeditated. For all our offences are either *culpa* or *dolus*. There is certainly no *dolus* here, but there is *culpa;* and we can say of such a man that he was guilty of his own death, but we cannot say of him that he is a suicide. What constitutes suicide is the intention to destroy oneself. Intemperance and excess which shorten life ought not, therefore, to be called suicide; for if we raise intemperance to the level of suicide, we lower suicide to the level of intemperance. Imprudence, which does not imply a desire to cease to live, must, therefore, be distinguished from the intention to murder oneself. Serious violations of our duty towards ourselves produce an aversion accompanied either by horror or by disgust; suicide is of the horrible kind, *crimina carnis* of the disgusting. We shrink in horror from suicide because all nature seeks its own preservation; an injured tree, a living body, an animal does so; how then could man make of his freedom, which is the acme of life and constitutes its worth, a principle for his own destruction? Nothing more terrible can be imagined; for if man were on every occasion master of his own life, he would be master of the lives of others; and being ready to sacrifice his life at any and every time rather than be captured, he could perpetrate every conceivable crime and vice. We are, therefore, horrified at the very thought of suicide; by it man sinks lower than the beasts; we look upon a suicide as carrion, whilst our sympathy goes forth to the victim of fate.

Those who advocate suicide seek to give the widest interpretation to freedom. There is something flattering in the thought that we can take our own life if we are so minded; and so we find even right-thinking persons defending suicide in this respect. There are many circumstances under which life ought to be sacrificed. If I cannot preserve my life except by violating my duties towards myself, I am bound to sacrifice my life rather than violate these duties. But suicide is in no circumstances permissible. Humanity in one's own person is something inviolable; it is a holy trust; man is master of all else, but he must not lay hands upon himself. A being who existed of

his own necessity could not possibly destroy himself; a being whose existence is not necessary must regard life as the condition of everything else, and in the consciousness that life is a trust reposed in him, such a being recoils at the thought of committing a breach of his holy trust by turning his life against himself. Man can only dispose over things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes over himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human nature and makes a thing of himself, becomes for everyone an Object of freewill. We are free to treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do a horse or a dog, for he is no longer a human being; he has made a thing of himself, and, having himself discarded his humanity, he cannot expect that others should respect humanity in him. Yet humanity is worthy of esteem. Even when a man is a bad man, humanity in his person is worthy of esteem. Suicide is not abominable and inadmissible because life should be highly prized; were it so, we could each have our own opinion of how highly we should prize it, and the rule of prudence would often indicate suicide as the best means. But the rule of morality does not admit of it under any condition because it degrades human nature below the level of animal nature and so destroys it. Yet there is much in the world far more important than life. To observe morality is far more important. It is better to sacrifice one's life than one's morality. To live is not a necessity; but to live honourably while life lasts is a necessity. We can at all times go on living and doing our duty towards ourselves without having to do violence to ourselves. But he who is prepared to take his own life is no longer worthy to live at all. The pragmatic ground of impulse to live is happiness. Can I then take my own life because I cannot live happily? No! It is not necessary that whilst I live I should live happily; but it is necessary that so long as I live I should live honourably. Misery gives no right to any man to take his own life, for then we should all be entitled to take our lives for lack of pleasure. All our duties towards ourselves would then be directed towards pleasure; but the fulfillment of those duties may demand that we should even sacrifice our life.

Is suicide heroic or cowardly? Sophistication, even though well meant, is not a good thing. It is not good to defend either virtue or vice by splitting hairs. Even right-thinking people declaim against suicide on wrong lines. They say that it is arrant cowardice. But instances of suicide of great heroism exist. We cannot, for example, regard the suicides of Cato and of Atticus as cowardly. Rage, passion and insanity are the most frequent causes of suicide, and that is why persons who attempt suicide and are saved from it are so terrified at their own act that they do not dare to repeat the attempt. There was a time in Roman and in Greek history when suicide was regarded as honourable, so much so that the Romans forbade their slaves to commit suicide because they did not belong to themselves but to their masters and so were regarded as things, like all other animals. The Stoics said that suicide is the sage's peaceful death; he leaves the world as he might leave a smoky room for another, because it no longer pleases him; he leaves the world, not because he is no longer happy in it, but because he disdains it. It has already been mentioned that man is greatly flattered by the idea that he is free to remove himself from this world, if he so wishes. He may not make use of this freedom, but the thought of possessing it pleases him. It seems even to have a moral aspect, for if man is capable of removing himself from the world at his own will, he need not submit to any one; he can retain his independence and tell the rudest truths to the cruellest of tyrants. Torture cannot bring him to heel, because he can leave the world at a moment's notice as a free man can leave the country, if and when he wills it. But this semblance of morality vanishes as soon as we see that man's freedom cannot subsist except on a condition which is immutable. This

condition is that man may not use his freedom against himself to his own destruction, but that, on the contrary, he should allow nothing external to limit it. Freedom thus conditioned is noble. No chance or misfortune ought to make us afraid to live; we ought to go on living as long as we can do so as human beings and honourably. To bewail one's fate and misfortune is in itself dishonourable. Had Cato faced any torments which Caesar might have inflicted upon him with a resolute mind and remained steadfast, it would have been noble of him; to violate himself was not so. Those who advocate suicide and teach that there is authority for it necessarily do much harm in a republic of free men. Let us imagine a state in which men held as a general opinion that they were entitled to commit suicide, and that there was even merit and honour in so doing. How dreadful everyone would find them. For he who does not respect his life even in principle cannot be restrained from the most dreadful vices; he recks neither king nor torments.

But as soon as we examine suicide from the standpoint of religion we immediately see it in its true light. We have been placed in this world under certain conditions and for specific purposes. But a suicide opposes the purpose of his Creator; he arrives in the other world as one who has deserted his post; he must be looked upon as a rebel against God. So long as we remember the truth that it is God's intention to preserve life, we are bound to regulate our activities in conformity with it. We have no right to offer violence to our nature's powers of self-preservation and to upset the wisdom of her arrangements. This duty is upon us until the time comes when God expressly commands us to leave this life. Human beings are sentinels on earth and may not leave their posts until relieved by another beneficent hand. God is our owner; we are His property; His providence works for our good. A bondman in the care of a beneficent master deserves punishment if he opposes his master's wishes. But suicide is not inadmissible and abominable because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it because it is abominal in that it degrades man's inner worth below that of the animal creation. Moral philosophers must, therefore, first and foremost show that suicide is abominable. We find, as a rule, that those who labour for their happiness are more liable to suicide; having tasted the refinements of pleasure, and being deprived of them, they give way to grief, sorrow, and melancholy.

Care for One's Life

We are in duty bound to take care of our life; but in this connexion it must be remarked that life, in and for itself, is not the greatest of the gifts entrusted to our keeping and of which we must take care. There are duties which are far greater than life and which can often be fulfilled only by sacrificing life. . . . It is cowardly to place a high value upon physical life. The man who on every trifling occasion fears for his life makes a laughing-stock of himself. We must await death with resolution. That must be of little importance which it is of great importance to despise.

On the other hand we ought not to risk our life and hazard losing it for interested and private purposes. To do so is not only imprudent but base. . . . How far we should value our life, and how far we may risk it, is a very subtle question. It turns on the following considerations. Humanity in our own person is an object of the highest esteem and is inviolable in us; rather than dishonour it, or allow it to be dishonoured, man ought to sacrifice his life; for can he himself hold his manhood in honour if it is to be dishonoured by others? If a man cannot preserve his

life except by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather to sacrifice it. . . . Thus it is far better to die honoured and respected than to prolong one's life for a few years by a disgraceful act and go on living a rogue. If, for instance, a woman cannot preserve her life any longer except by surrendering her person to the will of another, she is bound to give up her life rather than dishonour humanity in her own person, which is what she would be doing in giving herself up as a thing to the will of another.

. . . Necessity cannot cancel morality. If, then, I cannot preserve my life except by disgraceful conduct, virtue relieves me of this duty because a higher duty here comes into play and commands me to sacrifice my life.

CESARE BECCARIA (1738–1794)

from *Of Crimes and Punishments* (expanded in Archive)

Cesare Bonesana Beccaria was an Italian jurist and economist. Born of aristocratic parents in Milan, he was educated in a Jesuit school in Parma, which he found stifling to his character. After graduating in 1758 with a law degree from the University of Pavia, Beccaria returned to Milan where he began an association with a group of young intellectuals and reformers associated with the Enlightenment, led by Count Pietro Verri. At Verri's urging, Beccaria began work on what was to be his most influential work, Dei delitti e delle pene *(1764) (*Of Crimes and Punishments*), a critical study of criminal law. The work was enthusiastically received and, at the age of 26, Beccaria was immediately famous worldwide.*

In this work, Beccaria systematically criticizes the penal system of the time, which was characterized by frequent torture, secret proceedings, abuse of power, and excessive punishment. Beccaria's argument is deduced from a Rousseau-like social-contract theory and stressed the notion of "penal proportion." The degree of punishment is only justified by the degree that it endangers society; excess punishment is unjust and tyrannical. Beccaria also built his arguments using ideas from Montesquieu and the principle of utilitarianism—that criminal policies should seek the greatest good for the greatest number. He was also the first modern writer to argue against capital punishment, becoming the father of an abolitionist movement that continues to this day.

Beccaria's other important writings, in economics, were based on lectures given when he held the chair in public economy and commerce in the Palatine School in Milan from 1768 to 1770. These writings, including Elementi di economia pubblica*, which was published posthumously in 1804, anticipated the economic theories of Smith and Malthus. From 1771 until his death, Beccaria served on the Supreme Economic Council of Milan. His later life was characterized by ill health and family troubles, as well as the terror of the French Revolution, which he found excessive.*

In this selection from Of Crimes and Punishments*, Beccaria argues that if killing is sometimes justified, then suicide may be also. He answers the Aristotelian argument that suicide harms society by pointing out that the harm is less than that of an emigré, since the emigré takes his property with him but the suicide leaves his behind. He believes that laws punishing suicide, particularly those that*

involve forfeiture of property and dishonor the family, are both unjust and ineffective. Voltaire [q.v.] commented on this passage with remarks similar to these in entries in his Philosophical Dictionary.

Sources

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from OF CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS

Of Suicide

Suicide is a crime which seems not to admit of punishment, properly speaking; for it cannot be inflicted but on the innocent, or upon an insensible dead body. In the first case, it is unjust and tyrannical, for political liberty supposes all punishments entirely personal; in the second, it has the same effect, by way of example, as the scourging a statue. Mankind love life too well; the objects that surround them, the seducing phantom of pleasure, and hope, that sweetest error of mortals, which makes men swallow such large draughts of evil, mingled with a very few drops of good, allure them too strongly, to apprehend that this crime will ever be common from its unavoidable impunity. The laws are obeyed through fear of punishment, but death destroys all sensibility. What motive then can restrain the desperate hand of suicide?

He who kills himself does a less injury to society than he who quits his country for ever; for the other leaves his property behind him, but this carries with him at least a part of his substance. Besides, as the strength of society consists in the number of citizens, he who quits one nation to reside in another, becomes a double loss. This then is the question: whether it be advantageous to society that its members should enjoy the unlimited privilege of migration?

Every law that is not armed with force, or which, from circumstances, must be ineffectual, should not be promulgated. Opinion, which reigns over the minds of men, obeys the slow and indirect impressions of the legislator, but resists them when violently and directly applied; and useless laws communicate their insignificance to the most salutary, which are regarded more as obstacles to be surmounted than as safeguards of the public good. But further, our perceptions being limited, by enforcing the observance of laws which are evidently useless, we destroy the influence of the most salutary.

From this principle a wise dispenser of public happiness may draw some useful consequences, the explanation of which would carry me too far from my subject, which is to prove the inutility of making the nation a prison. Such a law is vain; because, unless inaccessible rocks or impassible seas divide the country from all others, how will it be possible to secure every point of the circumference, or how will you guard the guards themselves? Besides, this crime once committed cannot be punished; and to punish it before hand would be to punish the intention and not the action, the will, which is entirely out of the power of human laws. To punish the absent by confiscating

his effects, besides the facility of collusion, which would inevitably be the case, and which, without tyranny, could not be prevented, would put a stop to all commerce with other nations. To punish the criminal when he returns, would be to prevent him from repairing the evil he had already done to society, by making his absence perpetual. Besides, any prohibition would increase the desire of removing, and would infallibly prevent strangers from settling in the country.

What must we think of a government which has no means but fear to keep its subjects in their own country, to which, by the first impressions of their infancy, they are so strongly attached. The most certain method of keeping men at home is to make them happy; and it is the interest of every state to turn the balance, not only of commerce, but of felicity, in favour of its subjects. The pleasures of luxury are not the principle sources of this happiness, though, by preventing the too great accumulation of wealth in a few hands, they become a necessary remedy against the too great inequality of individuals, which always increases with the progress of society. . . .

. . . But, to return:—If it be demonstrated that the laws which imprison men in their own country are vain and unjust, it will be equally true of those which punish suicide; for that can only be punished after death, which is in the power of God alone; but it is no crime with regard to man, because the punishment falls on an innocent family. If it be objected, that the consideration of such a punishment may prevent the crime, I answer, that he who can calmly renounce the pleasure of existence, who is so weary of life as to brave the idea of eternal misery, will never be influenced by the more distant and less powerful considerations of family and children.

THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743–1826)

from *A Bill for Proportioning Crimes and Punishments in Cases Heretofore Capital* (in Archive only)

from *Letter to Dr. Samuel Brown*

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, was a person of remarkably broad interests. He was a leading architect of his day, played the violin in chamber music concerts, was an avid planter, and served as president of the American Philosophical Society. Born in Shadwell, Virginia, Jefferson grew to be an active participant in the state legislature, and later worked to create the University of Virginia. He traveled widely in Europe and was conversant with many currents of European thought.

Jefferson's best known contributions are found in the political thought, public service, and diplomatic activities that he gave to the newly formed United States of America. Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence and presented it to Congress (July 2, 1776). After the new country was formed, Jefferson served as its minister to France, as Secretary of State, and, from 1801 to 1809, as President.

Jefferson's writings recommend a minimum of governmental intervention and urge respect for certain human liberties: freedom of religion, press, speech, and other civil rights. Although he owned many slaves, he also held that slavery was wrong and hoped that the institution would eventually be abolished.

Jefferson did not address the issue of suicide at length, but two short notes exhibit his attitudes toward the practice and the laws governing it. In the various states forming the new United States, it was the law, as in England, that the property of a suicide would be forfeited, thus depriving the surviving family. In his footnote to the Virginia Crimes Bill of 1779, Jefferson argues against such legislation, drawing heavily on the arguments put forth by Beccaria [q.v.].

The personal, philosophic, and botanically minded sides of Jefferson are reflected in his letter of midsummer 1813 to Dr. Samuel Brown, a fellow member of the American Philosophical Society, who was practicing medicine at the time in Natchez. In this correspondence, Jefferson comments on the capacity of a certain poisonous plant to promote a quick and painless death, though he expresses concern about the dangers of a drug of such high lethality should it fall into the hands of others. He appears to accept its use in certain circumstances, especially incurable cancer: "There are ills in life as desperate as intolerable, to which it would be the rational relief."

Many of Jefferson's letters are responses to deaths of family members of his correspondents, and he often discussed death in objective terms. But he also had direct experience of its effects on family members: Jefferson's wife died in 1782, when he was 39, leaving him stunned and distraught, and five of his six children died during his lifetime. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the approval of the Declaration of Independence.

Sources

Thomas Jefferson, *Revisal of the Laws 1776–1786*, Bill #64: "A Bill for Proportioning Crimes and Punishments in Cases Heretofore Capital." Also available from the University of Chicago Press at http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/tocs/toc.html; "Letter to Dr. Samuel Brown," in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Definitive Edition, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh, Vol. XIII. Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907, pp. 310–311.

TO DR. SAMUEL BROWN

Monticello, July 14, 1813

Dear Sir,—Your favors of May 25th and June 13th have been duly received, as also the first supply of Capsicum, and the second o[f] the same article with other seeds. I shall set great store by the Capsicum, if it is hardy enough for our climate, the species we have heretofore tried being too tender. The Galvance too, will be particularly attended to, as it appears very different from what we cultivate by that name. I have so many grandchildren and others who might be endangered by the poison plant, that I think the risk overbalances the curiosity of trying it. The most elegant thing of that kind known is a preparation of the Jamestown weed, Datura-Stramonium, invented by the French in the time of Robespierre. Every man of firmness carried it constantly in his pocket to anticipate the guillotine. It brings on the sleep of death as quietly as fatigue does the ordinary sleep, without the least struggle or motion.

Condorcet, who had recourse to it, was found lifeless on his bed a few minutes after his landlady had left him there, and even the slipper which she had observed half suspended on his foot, was not shaken off. It seems far preferable to the Venesection of the Romans, the Hemlock of the Greeks, and the Opium of the Turks. I have never been able to learn what the preparation is, other than a strong concentration of its lethiferous principle. Could such a medicament be restrained to self-administration, it ought not to be kept secret. There are ills in life as desperate as intolerable, to which it would be the rational relief, *e.g.*, the inveterate cancer. As a relief from tyranny indeed, for which the Romans recurred to it in the times of the emperors, it has been a wonder to me that they did not consider a poignard in the breast of the tyrant as a better remedy. . . .

OLAUDAH EQUIANO (c. 1745–1797)

from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (expanded in Archive)

Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo, describes himself as born to a relatively prosperous, slave-owning family in the region east of the city of Onitsha, Nigeria, where ownership of slaves and slave-raiding were local practice at the time. At the age of about 10 or 11, Equiano was kidnapped along with his sister by local raiders and sold into slavery. His first owners were an African family located at some distance from his home, but still within the same linguistic sphere; he was then sold and resold several times until taken for transport on a British slave ship to Barbados and then to Virginia. Sold in Virginia to Lieutenant Michael Pascal of the Royal Navy, Equiano was renamed Gustavus Vassa (after the 16th- century Swedish king), and served in the "French and Indian" Seven Year's War in a celebrated naval encounter in Gibraltar in 1759. He was acquired by Robert King, a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia, who helped him purchase his freedom in 1766. Once emancipated, he traveled to the Arctic with the Phipps expeditions of 1772–-73 in search of a northwest passage, and around the Mediterranean in the service of an English gentleman. He lived among the Miskito Indians of Central America for six months, and later settled in London. Some recent voices have disputed Equiano's account of his birth in Africa, arguing that he was born in South Carolina and adapted others' writings or recollections of the Middle Passage as the source of his personal narrative; most scholars accept Equiano's account of his African origins as genuine.

After his emancipation, Equiano became an ardent abolitionist. One of very few Africans who emerged from slavery and became literate in the languages of the West, Equiano published The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself *(1789), an autobiographical account of his life, including his early childhood and recollections of Igbo culture in Africa, his kidnapping, enslavement, and sale to British slavers, and his transport into slavery in the New World that is the focus of the selection here. Speculative criticism both at*

the time and recently has challenged the authenticity of this document, insisting, as one early commentator did, that "it is not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in the compilement, or, at least, the correction of his book." Nevertheless, the book, importantly subtitled "Written by Himself," was well received and reviewed. It sold over 5,000 copies and became a major force in bringing about the Abolition Act (March 1807) and Emancipation Bill (July 1833). Equiano's work also served as one of the first records to shape the experiences of the black African diaspora during slavery and afterward. For the remainder of his life, Equiano continued to lecture against the slave trade; he married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen, in 1792, and they had two daughters in the years before he died.

Equiano's full work allows the reader to contrast the comparatively humane African forms of slavery with the relentlessly cruel and barbarous treatment accorded slaves in transport by their European captors. The passage included here begins after he has been sold and resold by African slavers, but is about to be loaded aboard ship for transport via the Middle Passage to the New World. Equiano describes his own impulses toward suicide, if he could have freed himself to do so, and attempts by his fellow slaves to jump overboard—attempts against which their captors were always on guard. Indeed, slavers often strung nets along the sides of the ship to prevent leaps into the water; they retrieved and sometimes executed and then mutilated those who did succeed in reaching the water, since the slavers were convinced, according to one historian of the period, that Africans believed mutilation would end the cycle of rebirth that otherwise would carry a suicide back home to Africa and his family. Wilfred Samuels says of Equiano's thoughts of suicide, "while suicide might have been a means of escaping the living hellhole that threatened to engulf him, his sacred traditions taught that committing suicide would sever him eternally from his ancestral roots." Of those slaves who did commit suicide, writes William Piersen, since they believed they would return to their former African homelands in the next life, "their deaths mark one of the world's greatest, but most overlooked, religious martyrdoms."

Sources

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Available online at Project Gutenberg #15399. Material in introduction from G. I. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," chapter 2 in Philip D. Curtin, *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, pp. 92–96; and from Wilfred D. Samuels, ed., *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Coral Gables, FL: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1989, and from William D. Pierson, *From Africa to America: African American History from the Colonial Era to the Early Republic, 1526–1790*. New York: Twayne, Simon and Schuster, 1996, pp. 31–32 . Quotation in introduction from Wilfred D. Samuels.

from THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO, OR GUSTAVUS VASSA, THE AFRICAN, WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slaveship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment,

which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, nor the then feelings of my mind. When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not; and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine-glass; but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks therefore took it from him, and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair. I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery, in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before; and although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it; yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side; but I could not; and, besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of them what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate: but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One

white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the manner. I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen: I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place the ship? They told me they did not, but came from a distant one. "Then," said I, "how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?" They told me, because they lived so very far off. I then asked, where were their women? Had they any like themselves? I was told they had. "And why," said I, "do we not see them?" they answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? They told me they could not tell; but that there were cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits. I therefore wished much to be from amongst them, for I expected they would sacrifice me: but my wishes were vain: for we were so quartered that it was impossible for any of us to make our escape. . . .

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness amongst the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now became insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself; I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. . . .

One day, when we had a smooth sea, and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea; immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were in a moment put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the

boat out to go after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade.

RICHARD HEY (1745–1835)

from *Dissertation on Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Born at Pudsey, near Leeds, Richard Hey was an English mathematician and essayist. In 1768, he received his B.A. from Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he was a tutor and fellow from 1782 to 1796 after completing M.A. and LL.D. degrees at Sidney Sussex College. Hey received a call to the bar in 1771 at the Middle Temple, but did not succeed in practice. He published Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty and the Principles of Government *in 1776; his principal work was the* Dissertation on the Pernicious Effects of Gaming *(1783). This latter work won Hey a monetary writing prize from an anonymous donor, as did his following works,* Dissertation on Duelling *(1784) and* Dissertation on Suicide *(1785). In addition to a play and a novel, Hey composed pamphlets and contributed papers to magazines. He died in Hertingfordbury in his 91st year.*

In the lengthy Dissertation on Suicide, *Hey discusses the guilt of suicide, its status as murder, its pernicious effects, and its imprudence. In the section presented here, Hey outlines the "bad effects of the principle which permits Suicide," arguing that the possibility of escape by suicide or the notion of suicide as a "resource" would induce "irregular and pernicious conduct." He also believes that the social acceptance of suicide would undercut the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent. Hey's point is more subtle than most writers who point to the negative consequences of suicide; for Hey, the problem lies not so much in the effects of the act itself as actually carried out, but in the social role of the principle under which it is performed—the background conception that suicide is an alternative to social responsibility and suffering, a way out. Hey's example of the young man deciding whether to live within his means and his inheritance for the full term of his life as a "useful member of society"—say, 60 years—or, dissolute, spend it all in 20 years and then kill himself when his resources are gone, anticipates later "balance-sheet" conceptions of suicide as the subject of rational, prudential decision-making, where the problematic issue is how to weigh nonexistence versus the value of continuing life.*

Source

Richard Hey, *Three Dissertations on the Pernicious Effects of Gaming, On Duelling, and On Suicide*, revised and corrected in 1811 by the author. Cambridge, UK: J. Smith, Printer to Cambridge University, 1812, pp. 208–219.

from DISSERTATION ON SUICIDE

Effects of the Principle which permits Suicide

[T]hough a person have Suicide in his eye, as a Resource in case of extreme distress, it may happen that he shall never be reduced to what he calls a *Necessity* of removing himself out of the world: but he may nevertheless, by his confidence in such a resource, be incited to an irregular and pernicious conduct. If we can make this to appear, the Guilt of Suicide will be not a little confirmed. And the harm derived from this particular origin, may be called, the bad Effects of *the Principle which permits Suicide*.

It is not meant that every one, who *acts* upon the *Principle* thus expounded, has formed a full and determinate resolution to die when his affairs are brought to any certain crisis, or when life becomes an evil in his estimation. . . . But men, in their general conduct, give proof of little foresight or thoughtful predetermination. Wherefore it is probable, that those who have made a formal (though only eventual) resolution to take refuge in Suicide, are but few in comparison of those who, without a similar resolution, would actually put a period to their lives in similar cases; and who, by their habitual state of mind, being at the mercy of conspiring circumstances, which may impel them to Suicide, are to be conceived as acting from the *Principle* now under discussion.

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If a person, who admits Suicide as a Resource, should analyze his inmost thoughts with impartiality, and utter them without reserve; we might hear him expressing himself to the following effect.

> I am told by solemn and supercilious preachers of morality, that the Being who placed me in this world intended me for purposes of a nature superiour (as they pretend) to the mere enjoyment of my life . . . I feel within me an impulse to pursue my immediate Happiness; and I will not check that impulse. Why may I not presume it to be the voice of my Creator, dictating the conduct which I should pursue? Why should I perplex myself with the artificial and fallible deductions of *Reason*, whether my own, or of other men? Here, then, I consign to oblivion those dull maxims; which, under the title of Virtue, would teach me to distract myself by an assiduous attention to the rights and interests of others, instead of giving myself freely to my own gratification; . . . Why should I shackle myself with the fetters of frugality? Why be my own tormentor, in reserving this pelf to a season when impotence and insensibility must render it useless to me? Or, why should I lay the tax of an abstemious temperance upon my pleasures, under pretence of preserving my health and faculties? Life is of doubtful duration. Why should I, in hopes of future enjoyments still more uncertain, spare my bodily constitution; when, for this end, I must deny myself what is present and certain? In what service can this mortal frame better be worn out, than in administering to my immediate Happiness? When it is no longer able to answer this purpose, I can readily procure my own dismission; after having compressed into the space of a few years all the Good which others by intermixing it with the misery of labour, temperance, and discipline, expand into a much more tedious length of time. When I have extracted from life all that makes it worth preserving, I will release myself; secretly exulting in triumph, over those who imagine themselves bound to drag on an old age of disease, pain, stupor, and infirmity.

Who does not see that this is a language which leads to a general dissoluteness of manners, a contempt of all the obligations which arise in social life? And who, that sees this, will afterwards maintain that the *Principle*, permitting Suicide, is a matter of small consequence, though it should not end in the Act itself?

Suppose then a person, at the age of twenty years, entering into life; who looks forward to his resources, and to the particular manner in which he should desire to pass through the world, with more accuracy than is perhaps very usual at that age. He finds upon his survey, that, with a moderate degree of industry in some particular profession, joined to the annual produce of his patrimony, he shall be able, not only to procure all the advantages of life which his birth and early habits can demand, but also to provide an honourable and indulgent retreat for old age. But he finds, on the other hand, that, if he will break through the limits of his annual income, and enter upon the substance of his paternal property, he shall then be able, *without* the aid of his own industry, to supply himself, during the space of twenty years to come, with a plentiful share of those luxuries in which he esteems Happiness to consist. The question is, whether he shall take the former method, become an useful member of society, content himself with that moderate and mixed enjoyment which the natural course of things allows to men, and continue his life long as he is permitted to live; or shall take the latter method, banish from his thoughts the interests of society, give himself up to his own private enjoyments, and put an end to his life when he has thus exhausted the means of continuing it in riot and debauchery. . . .

To see distinctly and fully the pernicious nature of such conduct, the way would be to conceive *every* person as embracing it: . . . [s]hould they all pursue a dissolute course of life so long as their finances would support them in it, depending upon Suicide as the means of escaping poverty and distress; the consequences would be extensively felt. Society must be burdened with a number of useless Beings; whose industry is lost to the public, not merely for that portion of time by which their lives are shortened, but even while they remain in life.

. . . [T]here are men in whom the fear of death is not strong enough to restrain them from the commission of crimes . . . [and] the fear of Ignominy is frequently found more powerful than the fear of Death; . . . it may sometimes happen, that a person, with whom the fear of Death has lost its effect, of restraining him from the commission of a capital crime, may yet be restrained from it by the fear of Ignominy; unless this latter fear has been removed by a confidence in voluntary death, to prevent the ignominy.

But, whensoever a person has, by this confidence, armed himself with a security against the Ignominy, which is all that *he* sees sufficiently terrible, in Death, to restrain him from crime; we may apprehend Effects of a most alarming nature. With respect to him, capital punishments are annulled. . . .

It is evident that all these Effects are distinct from the consequences of Suicide itself, and may arise without the actual Commission of it. But, since all moral evil has its existence in the mind rather than in external action, and since the Guilt of Suicide is therefore to be looked for in the Principle, Sentiment, or Passion, from which it proceeds; for this reason, *all* the Effects of the Principle . . . are properly taken into the account, as well as the final act, in estimating the Guilt of Suicide.

JEREMY BENTHAM (1748–1832)

from *Principles of Penal Law*
from *Principles of Judicial Procedure*

Jeremy Bentham was a philosopher, economist, and legal theorist. Born in London, Bentham is said to have been a precocious child; at as young as three or four years of age, he started to read and study Latin. Bentham entered Queen's College in 1760 at the age of 12, where he studied law, graduating in 1763. Although he was called to the bar, he showed no inclination towards practicing law. He wrote extensively on legal theory in such works as A Fragment on Government *(1776) (in which he criticized Blackstone's [q.v.]* Commentaries*),* Rationale of Punishment and Rewards *(1811), and* Defense of Usury *(1787). In 1823, he helped to found the Westminster Review in order to promote the principles of the Philosophical Radicals, a group that included such thinkers as James and John Stuart Mill. In all of his many, frequently unfinished writings, Bentham sought to create a simplified, coherent, and humane legal system.*

Bentham is today remembered as the defender of the utilitarian principle he first outlined in 1789 in his An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation. *He held that the morality of an action is determined by its utility, and the object of all conduct and legislation should be to assure "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." According to Bentham, pleasure and pain are the two chief motives that govern mankind, and the role of law is to maintain a just balance between rewards and punishments. Bentham felt that punishment was evil in that it involved pain; he became a pioneer for prison reform and conceived of an ideal prison known as the "Panopticon." He died in London on June 6, 1832, "surrounded by 70,000 sheets of manuscript on the theory of law and all conceivably related subjects." Bentham's embalmed body, dressed in his own clothes and with a wax head, sits in a glass case in the foyer of London's University College, a school he helped found.*

In these excerpts from Principles of Penal Law *and* Principles of Judicial Procedure, *Bentham condemns the current laws regarding the punishment of suicide as illogical and cruel, and hints at some of the conceptual puzzles that the then-current conceptualization of suicide raises.*

Sources

Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Penal Law*, Part II, Book IV, "Vicarious Punishment," and *Principles of Judicial Procedure*, Ch. VIII, "Judicial Application," in John Bowring, ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham (1838–1843)*, facsimile edition, New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962, Vol. 1, pp. 479–480; Vol. 2, p. 41. Quotation in biographical note from Ross Harrison, *Bentham*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 1.

from PRINCIPLES OF PENAL LAW

Vicarious Punishment

In the English law, the only instance which is to be seen of a case of mis-seated punishment, which is clearly and palpably vicarious, is that of the punishment attached to suicide. It may perhaps be said, that the man himself is punished as much as the case will admit of; that his body used to be pierced with a stake, that he is still buried with ignominy, and that, with respect to him, every thing that could be done, is done; that this is not found sufficient, and that, as an additional check to the commission of this offence, it is necessary to call in aid the contemplation of the sufferings that his wife and children may endure by his death. But the effect of this contrivance is obviously very trifling. The prospect of the pain he shall suffer by continuing to live, affects him more than that of the pain it seems to him they will suffer upon his putting himself to death. He is more affected, then, with his own happiness than with theirs: the selfish predominate in his mind over the social affections. But the punishment of forfeiture, that is, the punishment of those relations and friends, can have the effect of preventing his design upon no other supposition than that the social affections are predominant in him over the selfish; that he is more touched by their suffering than by his own: but this is shown by his conduct not to be the case.

Nor is this all: it is not only nugatory as to its declared purpose, but in the highest degree cruel. When a family has thus been deprived of its head, the law at that moment steps in to deprive them of their means of subsistence.

The answer to this may be, that there is some species of property, which upon this occasion is not forfeited; that the law is not executed; that the jury elude it, by finding the suicide to be insane; and that, moreover, the king has the power of remitting the forfeiture, and of leaving to the widow and orphans the paternal property.

That such is the disposition of juries, and of the sovereign, is undeniable: but is that a reason for preserving in the penal code, a law that it is considered a duty invariably to elude? And by what means is it eluded? By perjury; by a declaration made by twelve men, upon oath, that the suicide was deranged in his mind, even in cases in which all the circumstances connected with the case exhibit marks of a deliberate and steady determination. The consequence is, that every suicide who dies worth any property, is declared to be *non compos*. It is only the poorest of the poor, who, after making the same calculation that was made by Cato, and finding the balance on the same side, act accordingly, that are ever found to be in their senses, and their wives and children to be proper victims for the rigour of the law. The cure for these atrocious absurdities is perjury: perjury is the penance that, at the expense of religion, prevents an outrage on humanity.

from PRINCIPLES OF JUDICIAL PROCEDURE

Judicial Application

In the case of coroners and coroners' juries,—as often as suicide is declared the result of insanity, when in fact it is the result of calculation—a calculation by which it is determined, that in what remains of life, if preserved, the quantity of pain will outweigh that of pleasure. The cases in which the operation is declared not to be the result of insanity are extremely rare. And then what are they? Those generally in which a man has left neither property nor friends, by whom his property, if any, at his decease could be shared. When the confidant of the Holy Alliance, so truly called holy (for what wickedness is equal to that called holiness?) put an end to his life, what he did was, as everybody knows, deliberate. If suicide is an act of insanity, so is voluntary entering into a military service—so is choosing what appears the least of any two evils.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE (1749–1832)

from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (expanded in Archive)

from *Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*

Goethe was a poet, dramatist, amateur scientist, and man of letters. His lyrical style helped to invigorate German literature, and he is widely considered to be Germany's greatest poet. Goethe also engaged in various kinds of scientific research, including work on plant and human morphology and on the theory of color. Born to a wealthy family in Frankfurt and educated by private tutors, Goethe studied at the universities of Leipzig and Strasbourg and was licensed to practice law. He also found time to study drawing and to expand his interests in writing. A ruptured blood vessel in his lung brought him back to Frankfurt to recover before he could finish his degree at Leipzig. In 1770, he moved to Strasbourg, where he finished his education.

There, Goethe's talent flourished under the influence of Johann Gottfried von Herder, who stimulated Goethe's interest in classic literature. Goethe's epistolary novella of 1774, The Sorrows of Young Werther, *relates the story of a young man with a deeply romantic temperament whose unrequited love affair leads him to suicide, presumed to be inspired by Goethe's infatuation with a married woman, Charlotte Buff, and the suicide of another lawyer. The book was a European bestseller, and, it is said, the favorite reading matter of Napoleon I. It was also blamed for a rash of suicides of lovesick young people that broke out across Europe, giving the name "the Werther Effect" to copycat suicides.*

Goethe's early Sturm und Drang *("Storm and Stress") works were followed by the more mature neoclassicism of such dramas as* Iphigenia in Tauris *(1779) and many others. In 1775, Goethe accepted an invitation to become adviser to Karl August, the duke of Weimar, at whose court he remained for the rest of his life. Trips to Italy in 1786–1788 and again in 1790 strongly influenced his writing and philosophy along neoclassical lines. In* The Tragedy of Faust *(Part I first published 1808; Part II in 1833), Goethe's best-known and most widely read work, he tells of a man who makes a pact with the devil, Mephistopheles, which may cost him his soul. Unlike other, earlier Faust figures, Goethe's Faust expresses the author's belief that it is the natural state of man to seek perfection, but that he may come to contemplate suicide when dejected by his failure to know everything.*

Published in four parts, Goethe's autobiography, Aus Meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit *(translated as* Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*) (vols. I, 1811, II, 1812, III, 1814, IV, 1833), makes reference to his own weariness of life—due in part, he intimates, to reading English poetry—and his thoughts of suicide, both how he conceived of doing it and what helped him to overcome the thought. He also describes the relationship between his own experiences and the composition of* The Sorrows of Young Werther.

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from THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

August 12

Certainly Albert is the best fellow in the world. I had a strange scene with him yesterday. I went to take leave of him; for I took it into my head to spend a few days in these mountains, from where I now write to you. As I was walking up and down his room, my eye fell upon his pistols. "Lend me those pistols," said I, "for my journey." "By all means," he replied, "if you will take the trouble to load them; for they only hang there for form." I took down one of them. . . .

. . . [W]ith a sudden motion, I pointed the mouth of the pistol to my forehead, over the right eye. "What do you mean?" cried Albert, turning back the pistol. "It is not loaded," said I. "And even if not," he answered with impatience, "what can you mean? I cannot comprehend how a man can be so mad as to shoot himself, and the bare idea of it shocks me."

"But why should any one," said I, "in speaking of an action, venture to pronounce it mad or wise, or good or bad? What is the meaning of all this? Have you carefully studied the secret motives of our actions? Do you understand—can you explain the causes which occasion them, and make them inevitable? If you can, you will be less hasty with your decision."

"But you will allow," said Albert, "that some actions are criminal, let them spring from whatever motives they may." I granted it, and shrugged my shoulders.

"But still, my good friend," I continued, "there are some exceptions here too. Theft is a crime; but the man who commits it from extreme poverty, with no design but to save his family from perishing, is he an object of pity, or of punishment? Who shall throw the first stone at a husband, who, in the heat of just resentment, sacrifices his faithless wife and her perfidious seducer? or at the young maiden, who, in her weak hour of rapture, forgets herself in the impetuous joys of love? Even our laws, cold and cruel as they are, relent in such cases, and withhold their punishment."

"That is quite another thing," said Albert; "because a man under the influence of violent passion loses all power of reflection, and is regarded as intoxicated or insane."

"Oh! You people of sound understandings," I replied, smiling, "are ever ready to exclaim 'Extravagance, and madness, and intoxication!' You moral men are so calm and so subdued! You abhor the drunken man, and detest the extravagant; you pass by, like the Levite, and thank God, like the Pharisee, that you are not like one of them. I have been more than once intoxicated, my passions have always bordered on extravagance: I am not ashamed to confess it; for I have learned, by my own experience, that all extraordinary men, who have accomplished great and astonishing actions, have ever been decried by the world as drunken or insane. And in private life, too, is it not intolerable that no one can undertake the execution of a noble or generous deed, without giving rise to the exclamation that the doer is intoxicated or mad? Shame upon you, ye sages!"

"This is another of your extravagant humours," said Albert: "you always exaggerate a case, and in this matter you are undoubtedly wrong; for we were speaking of suicide, which you compare with great actions, when it is impossible to regard it as anything but a weakness. It is much easier to die than to bear a life of misery with fortitude."

I was on the point of breaking off the conversation, for nothing puts me so completely out of patience as the utterance of a wretched commonplace when I am talking from my inmost heart. However, I composed myself, for I had often heard the same observation with sufficient vexation; and I answered him, therefore, with a little warmth, "You call this a weakness—beware of being led astray by appearances. When a nation, which has long groaned under the intolerable yoke of a tyrant, rises at last and throws off its chains, do you call that weakness? The man who, to rescue his house from the flames, finds his physical strength redoubled, so that he lifts burdens with ease, which, in the absence of excitement, he could scarcely move; he who, under the rage of an insult, attacks and puts to flight half a score of his enemies,—are such persons to be called weak? My good friend, if resistance be strength, how can the highest degree of resistance be a weakness?"

Albert looked steadfastly at me, and said, "Pray forgive me, but I do not see that the examples you have adduced bear any relation to the question." "Very likely," I answered; "for I have often been told that my style of illustration borders a little on the absurd. But let us see if we cannot place the matter in another point of view, by inquiring what can be a man's state of mind who resolves to free himself from the burden of life,—a burden often so pleasant to bear,—for we cannot otherwise reason fairly upon the subject.

"Human nature," I continued, "has its limits. It is able to endure a certain degree of joy, sorrow, and pain, but becomes annihilated as soon as this measure is exceeded. The question, therefore, is, not whether a man is strong or weak, but whether he is able to endure the measure of his

sufferings. The suffering may be moral or physical; and in my opinion it is just as absurd to call a man a coward who destroys himself, as to call a man a coward who dies of a malignant fever."

"Paradox, all paradox!" exclaimed Albert. "Not so paradoxical as you imagine," I replied. "You allow that we designate a disease as mortal when nature is so severely attacked, and her strength so far exhausted, that she cannot possibly recover her former condition under any change that may take place.

"Now, my good friend, apply this to the mind; observe a man in his natural, isolated condition; consider how ideas work, and how impressions fasten on him, till at length a violent passion seizes him, destroying all his powers of calm reflection, and utterly ruining him.

"It is in vain that a man of sound mind and cool temper understands the condition of such a wretched being, in vain he counsels him. He can no more communicate his own wisdom to him than a healthy man can instill his strength into the invalid, by whose bedside he is seated."

Albert thought this too general. I reminded him of a girl who had drowned herself a short time previously, and I related her history.

She was a good creature, who had grown up in the narrow sphere of household industry and weekly-appointed labour; one who knew no pleasure beyond indulging in a walk on Sundays, arrayed in her best attire, accompanied by her friends, or perhaps joining in the dance now and then at some festival, and chatting away her spare hours with a neighbour, discussing the scandal or the quarrels of the village,—trifles sufficient to occupy her heart. At length the warmth of her nature is influenced by certain new and unknown wishes. Inflamed by the flatteries of men, her former pleasures become by degrees insipid, till at length she meets with a youth to whom she is attracted by an indescribable feeling; upon him she now rests all her hopes; she forgets the world around her; she sees, hears, desires nothing but him, and him only. He alone occupies all her thoughts. Uncorrupted by the idle indulgence of an enervating vanity, her affection moving steadily toward its object, she hopes to become his, and to realise, in an everlasting union with him, all that happiness which she sought, all that bliss for which she longed. His repeated promises confirm her hopes: embraces and endearments, which increase the ardour of her desires, overmaster her soul. She floats in a dim, delusive anticipation of her happiness; and her feelings become excited to their utmost tension. She stretches out her arms finally to embrace the object of all her wishes—and her lover forsakes her. Stunned and bewildered, she stands upon a precipice. All is darkness around her. No prospect, no hope, no consolation—forsaken by him in whom her existence was centered! She sees nothing of the wide world before her, thinks nothing of the many individuals who might supply the void in her heart; she feels herself deserted, forsaken by the world; and, blinded and impelled by the agony which wrings her soul, she plunges into the deep, to end her sufferings in the broad embrace of death. See here, Albert, the history of thousands; and tell me, is not this a case of physical infirmity? Nature has no way to escape from the labyrinth: her powers are exhausted: she can contend no longer, and the poor soul must die.

"Shame upon him who can look on calmly, and exclaim, 'The foolish girl! she should have waited; she should have allowed time to wear off the impression; her despair would have been softened, and she would have found another lover to comfort her.' One might as well say, 'The fool, to die of a fever! Why did he not wait till his strength was restored, till his blood became calm? All would then have gone well, and he would have been alive now.'"

Albert, who could not see the justice of the comparison, offered some further objections, and, amongst others, urged that I had taken the case of a mere ignorant girl. But how any man of sense, of more enlarged views and experience, could be excused, he was unable to comprehend.

"My friend!" I exclaimed, "man is but man; and, whatever be the extent of his reasoning powers, they are of little avail when passion rages within, and he feels himself confined by the narrow limits of nature, It were better, then—but we will talk of this some other time," I said, and caught up my hat. Alas! My heart was full; and we parted without conviction on either side. How rarely in this world do men understand each other!

August 18

It is as if a curtain had been drawn from before my eyes, and, instead of prospects of eternal life, the abyss of an ever open grave yawned before me. Can we say of anything that it exists when all passes away,—when time, with the speed of a storm, carries all things onward,—and our transitory existence, hurried along by the torrent, is either swallowed up by the waves or dashed against the rocks? There is not a moment but preys upon you, and upon all around you,—not a moment in which you do not yourself become a destroyer. The most innocent walk deprives of life thousands of poor insects: one step destroys the fabric of the industrious ant, and converts a little world into chaos. No: it is not the great and rare calamities of the world, the floods which sweep away whole villages, the earthquakes which swallow up our towns, that affect me. My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies concealed in every part of universal nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not consume itself, and every object near it: so that, surrounded by earth and air, and all the active powers, I wander on my way with aching heart; and the universe is to me a fearful monster, for ever devouring its own offspring. . . .

December 15

What is the matter with me, dear Wilhelm? I am afraid of myself! Is not my love for her of the purest, most holy, and most brotherly nature? Has my soul ever been sullied by a single-sensual desire? But I will make no protestations. And now, ye nightly visions, how truly have those mortals understood you, who ascribe your various contradictory effects to some invincible power! This night—I tremble at the avowal—I held her in my arms, locked in a close embrace: I pressed her to my bosom, and covered with countless kisses those dear lips which murmured in reply soft protestations of love. My sight became confused by the delicious intoxication of her eyes. Heavens! Is it sinful to revel again in such happiness, to recall once more those rapturous moments with intense delight? Charlotte! Charlotte! I am lost! My senses are bewildered, my recollection is confused, mine eyes are bathed in tears—I am ill; and yet I am well—I wish for nothing—I have no desires—it were better I were gone.

[Narrator continues] Under the circumstances narrated above, a determination to quit this world had now taken fixed possession of Werther's soul. Since Charlotte's return, this thought had been the final object of all his hopes and wishes; but he had resolved that such a step should not be taken with precipitation, but with calmness and tranquility, and with the most perfect deliberation.

. . . [Werther's] appearance at length became quite altered by the effect of his melancholy thoughts; and his resolution was now finally and irrevocably taken, of which the following ambiguous letter, which he addressed to his friend, may appear to afford some proof.

On Monday morning, the 21st of December, he wrote to Charlotte the following letter, which was found, sealed, on his bureau after his death, and was given to her. I shall insert it in fragments; as it appears, from several circumstances, to have been written in that manner.

"It is all over, Charlotte: I am resolved to die! I make this declaration deliberately and coolly, without any romantic passion, on this morning of the day when I am to see you for the last time. At the moment you read these lines, O best of women, the cold grave will hold the inanimate remains of that restless and unhappy being who, in the last moments of his existence, knew no pleasure so great as that of conversing with you! I have passed a dreadful night—or rather, let me say, a propitious one; for it has given me resolution, it has fixed my purpose. I am resolved to die. When I tore myself from you yesterday, my senses were in tumult and disorder; my heart was oppressed, hope and pleasure had fled from me for ever, and a petrifying cold had seized my wretched being. I could scarcely reach my room. I threw myself on my knees; and Heaven, for the last time, granted me the consolation of shedding tears. A thousand ideas, a thousand schemes, arose within my soul; till at length one last, fixed, final thought took possession of my heart. It was to die. I lay down to rest; and in the morning, in the quiet hour of awakening, the same determination was upon me. To die! It is not despair: it is conviction that I have filled up the measure of my sufferings, that I have reached my appointed term, and must sacrifice myself for thee. Yes, Charlotte, why should I not avow it? One of us three must die: it shall be Werther. O beloved Charlotte! this heart, excited by rage and fury, has often conceived the horrid idea of murdering your husband—you—myself! The lot is cast at length. And in the bright, quiet evenings of summer, when you sometimes wander toward the mountains, let your thoughts then turn to me: recollect how often you have watched me coming to meet you from the valley; then bend your eyes upon the churchyard which contains my grave, and, by the light of the setting sun, mark how the evening breeze waves the tall grass which grows above my tomb. I was calm when I began this letter, but the recollection of these scenes makes me weep like a child."

He trembled; his heart was ready to burst: then, taking up the book again, he recommenced reading, in a voice broken by sobs.

"Why dost thou waken me, O spring? Thy voice woos me, exclaiming, I refresh thee with heavenly dews; but the time of my decay is approaching, the storm is nigh that shall wither my leaves. To-morrow the traveller shall come,—he shall come, who beheld me in beauty: his eye shall seek me in the field around, but he shall not find me."

"For the last, last time I open these eyes. Alas! they will behold the sun no more. It is covered by a thick, impenetrable cloud. Yes, Nature! put on mourning: your child, your friend, your lover, draws near his end! This thought, Charlotte, is without parallel; and yet it seems like a mysterious dream when I repeat—this is my last day! The last! Charlotte, no word can adequately express this thought. The last! To-day I stand erect in all my strength—to-morrow, cold and stark, I shall lie extended upon the ground. To die! What is death? We do but dream in our discourse upon it. I have seen many human beings die; but, so straitened is our feeble nature, we have no clear conception of the beginning or the end of our existence. At this moment I am my own—or rather I am thine, thine, my adored!—and the next we are parted, severed—perhaps for ever! No, Charlotte, no! How can I, how can you, be annihilated? We exist. What is annihilation? A mere word, an unmeaning sound that fixes no impression on the mind. Dead, Charlotte! laid in the cold earth, in the dark and narrow grave! I had a friend once who was everything to me in early youth. She died. I followed her hearse; I stood by her grave when the coffin was lowered; and when I heard the creaking of the cords as they were loosened and drawn up, when the first shovelful of earth was thrown in, and the coffin returned a hollow sound, which grew fainter and fainter till all was completely covered over, I threw myself on the ground; my heart was smitten, grieved, shattered, rent—but I neither knew what had happened, nor what was to happen to

me. Death! the grave! I understand not the words.—Forgive, oh, forgive me! Yesterday—ah, that day should have been the last of my life! Thou angel!—for the first—first time in my existence, I felt rapture glow within my inmost soul. She loves, she loves me! Still burns upon my lips the sacred fire they received from thine. New torrents of delight overwhelm my soul. Forgive me, oh, forgive!

"See, Charlotte, I do not shudder to take the cold and fatal cup, from which I shall drink the draught of death. Your hand presents it to me, and I do not tremble. All, all is now concluded: the wishes and the hopes of my existence are fulfilled. With cold, unflinching hand I knock at the brazen portals of Death.

"Oh, that I had enjoyed the bliss of dying for you! how gladly would I have sacrificed myself for you, Charlotte! And could I but restore peace and joy to your bosom, with what resolution, with what joy, would I not meet my fate! But it is the lot of only a chosen few to shed their blood for their friends, and by their death to augment, a thousand times, the happiness of those by whom they are beloved.

"I wish, Charlotte, to be buried in the dress I wear at present: it has been rendered sacred by your touch. I have begged this favour of your father. My spirit soars above my sepulchre. I do not wish my pockets to be searched. The knot of pink ribbon which you wore on your bosom the first time I saw you, surrounded by the children—Oh, kiss them a thousand times for me, and tell them the fate of their unhappy friend! I think I see them playing around me. The dear children! How warmly have I been attached to you, Charlotte! Since the first hour I saw you, how impossible have I found it to leave you. This ribbon must be buried with me: it was a present from you on my birthday. How confused it all appears! Little did I then think that I should journey this road. But peace! I pray you, peace!

"They are loaded—the clock strikes twelve, I say amen. Charlotte, Charlotte! farewell, farewell!"

from TRUTH AND POETRY: FROM MY OWN LIFE

Suicide is an event of human nature which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew. Montesquieu grants his heroes and great men the right of killing themselves as they think fit, since he says that it must be free to every one to close the fifth act of his tragedy as he pleases. But here the discourse is not of those persons who have led an active and important life, who have sacrificed their days for a great empire, or for the cause of freedom, and whom one cannot blame if they think to follow in another world the idea which inspires them, as soon as it has vanished from the earth. We have here to do with those whose life is embittered by a want of action, in the midst of the most peaceful circumstances in the world, through exaggerated demands upon themselves. Since I myself was in this predicament, and best knew the pain I suffered in it, and the exertion it cost me to free myself, I will not conceal the reflections which I made, with much deliberation, on the various kinds of death which one might choose.

There is something so unnatural in a man tearing himself away from himself, not only injuring, but destroying himself, that he mostly seizes upon mechanical means to carry his design into execution. When Ajax falls upon his sword, it is the weight of his body which does him the last service. When the warrior binds his shield-bearer not to let him fall into the hands of the enemy, it is still an external force which he secures, only a moral instead of a physical one. Women seek in water a cooling for their despair, and the extremely mechanical means of fire-arms ensure a rapid act with the very least exertion. Hanging, one does not like to mention, because it is an ignoble death. In England one may first find it, because there, from youth upwards, one sees so many hanged, without the punishment being precisely dishonourable. By poison, by opening the veins, the only intention is to depart slowly from life; and that most refined, rapid, and painless death by an adder, was worthy of a queen, who had passed her life in pleasure and brilliancy. But all these are external aids, enemies with which man forms an alliance against himself.

When now I considered all these means, and looked about further in history, I found among all those who killed themselves no one who did this deed with such greatness and freedom of mind, as the Emperor Otho. He, having the worst of it as a general, but being by no means reduced to extremities, resolves to quit the world for the benefit of the empire, which, in some measure, already belongs to him, and for the sake of sparing so many thousands. He has a cheerful supper with his friends, and the next morning it is found that he has plunged a sharp dagger into his heart. This deed alone seemed to me worthy of imitation; and I was convinced that whoever could not act in this like Otho, had no right to go voluntarily out of the world. By these convictions, I freed myself not so much from the danger as from the whim of suicide, which in those splendid times of peace, and with an indolent youth, had managed to creep in. Among a considerable collection of weapons, I possessed a handsome, well polished dagger. This I laid every night by my bed, and before I extinguished the candle, I tried whether I could succeed in plunging the sharp point a couple of inches deep into my heart. Since I never could succeed in this, I at last laughed myself out of the notion, threw off all hypochondriacal fancies, and resolved to live. But to be able to do this with cheerfulness, I was obliged to solve a poetical problem, by which all that I had felt, thought, and fancied upon this important point, should be reduced to words. For this purpose I collected the elements which had been at work in me for a few years; I rendered present to my mind the cases which had most afflicted and tormented me; but nothing would come to a definite form; I lacked an event, a fable, in which they could be overlooked.

All at once I heard the news of Jerusalem's death, and immediately after the general report, the most accurate and circumstantial description of the occurrence, and at this moment the plan of *Werther* was formed, and the whole shot together from all sides, and became a solid mass, just as water in a vessel, which stands upon the point of freezing, is converted into hard ice by the most gentle shake. To hold fast this singular prize, to render present to myself, and to carry out in all its parts a work of such important and various contents was the more material to me, as I had again fallen into a painful situation, which left me even less hope than those which had preceded it, and foreboded only sadness, if not vexation.

WILLIAM GODWIN (1756–1836)

from *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (expanded in Archive)

from *Memoirs of the Author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'* (expanded in Archive)

William Godwin, as both novelist and as radical political philosopher, advocated the abolition of legal and social restrictions imposed by government or controlling members of society. Born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, he served as a minister of a dissenting religious sect, Sandemanianism, in his youth, but by 1788, he had rejected these beliefs and embraced atheism. In his writings on political philosophy, he developed a form of theoretical anarchism, defended in his best-known work, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness *(1793). His novel* Things as They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams *(1794) continued his opposition to restrictions imposed on the freedom of individuals.*

Godwin's Utilitarian account of justice in Enquiry Concerning Political Justice *leads him to address a dilemma about the issue of obligatory death. According to Utilitarian theory, each person counts for one, and justice is impartial among individuals; however, it is also the case that the existence of one individual may have better consequences for society as a whole than that of another. Godwin's example here is Fénelon, François de Salignac de la Motte (1651–1715), archbishop of Cambray, whose bitter satire on the rule of Louis XIV,* Telemachus *(1699), was held by Godwin to be of immense social importance. The Utilitarian obligation to act so as to produce "the greatest good for the greatest number," Godwin implies, could entail that you ought to choose to die to save another person of greater worth, like Fénelon, or to benefit the society as a whole. In the appendix, "Of Suicide," Godwin dismisses most motives for suicide as trivial, including those intended to avoid disgrace, "an imaginary evil," and considers the consequences of suicide for the person most directly affected, the suicide him or herself. Godwin's Utilitarian outlook is reflected in his account of how prospective suicides—whether martyrs dying for the faith or Roman Stoics dying for the welfare of the country—might balance the good and bad outcomes of their deaths.*

In 1797, Godwin married Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist thinker who had gained considerable recognition for her work A Vindication of the Rights of Woman *(1792). They had each been committed to independence and had scorned conventional domestic roles, maintaining separate studies and residences, but when she found herself pregnant, they married. Just five months later, however, Wollstonecraft died giving birth to a daughter, also named Mary, who eventually married the poet Percy Bysse Shelley and achieved fame as the writer of* Frankenstein *and other works. Struggling with his grief, within a few short months of Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin wrote the* Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman *(1798), an account of his wife's life largely based on what she had related to him firsthand. As Godwin himself explained, they had regarded each*

other as equals, and he had led her to discuss many issues and incidents in her life. Godwin's narrative includes a description of Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt at Putney Bridge in London following a rejection from an earlier lover, Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a child, Fanny. This posthumous biography was unprecedented in its disclosure of intimate detail, but fully understanding of Mary and passionately committed to her genius. It also conveys Godwin's unconventional view of suicide: he argues that many persons choosing suicide, as in Wollstonecraft's case, may later discover happiness if the attempt at death fails, and his Utilitarian outlook leads him to favor this greater happiness rather than succumb to current despair. But it is his view that the motives for suicide are almost often mistaken, not that suicide is in itself wrong.

Sources

William Godwin, "Of Justice" and "Of Suicide," from *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness (1793)*, Book II, Chapter II, and Appendix I. Online at the McMaster University Archive for the History of Economic Thought at http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/godwin/pj.html; *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, London: Printed for J. Johnson and G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798. Online at Project Gutenberg Release #16199 at http://www.gutenberg.org.

from ENQUIRY CONCERNING POLITICAL JUSTICE

Of Suicide

This reasoning will throw some light upon the long disputed case of suicide. "Have I a right to destroy myself in order to escape from pain or distress?" Circumstances that should justify such an action, can rarely occur. There are few situations that can exclude the possibility of future life, vigour, and usefulness. It will frequently happen that the man, who once saw nothing before him but despair, shall afterwards enjoy a long period of happiness and honour. In the meantime the power of terminating our own lives, is one of the faculties with which we are endowed; and therefore, like every other faculty, is a subject of moral discipline. In common with every branch of morality, it is a topic of calculation, as to the balance of good and evil to result from its employment in any individual instance. We should however be scrupulously upon our guard against the deceptions that melancholy and impatience are so well calculated to impose. We should consider that, though the pain to be suffered by ourselves is by no means to be overlooked, we are but one, and the persons nearly or remotely interested in our possible usefulness innumerable. Each man is but the part of a great system, and all that he has is so much wealth to be put to the account of the general stock.

There is another case of suicide of more difficult estimation. What shall we think of the reasoning of Lycurgus, who, when he determined upon a voluntary death, remarked "that all the faculties a rational being possessed were capable of being benevolently employed, and that, after having spent his life in the service of his country, a man ought, if possible, to render his death a source of additional benefit"? This was the motive of the suicide of Codrus, Leonidas and

Decius. If the same motive prevailed in the much admired suicide of Cato, and he were instigated by reasons purely benevolent, it is impossible not to applaud his intention, even if he were mistaken in the application. The difficulty is to decide whether in any instance the recourse to a voluntary death can overbalance the usefulness to be displayed, in twenty years of additional life.

Additional importance will be reflected upon this disquisition if we remember that martyrs (martures) are suicides by the very signification of the term. They die for a testimony (martution [maturia]). But that would be impossible if their death were not to a certain degree a voluntary action. We must assume that it was possible for them to avoid this fate, before we can draw any conclusion from it in favour of the cause they espoused. They were determined to die, rather than reflect dishonour on that cause.

from MEMOIRS OF THE AUTHOR OF 'A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN'

In April 1795, Mary [Wollstonecraft] returned once more to London, being requested to do so by Mr. Imlay, who even sent a servant to Paris to wait upon her in the journey, before she could complete the necessary arrangements for her departure. But, notwithstanding these favourable appearances, she came to England with a heavy heart, not daring, after all the uncertainties and anguish she had endured, to trust to the suggestions of hope.

The gloomy forebodings of her mind, were but too faithfully verified. Mr. Imlay had already formed another connexion; as it is said, with a young actress from a strolling company of players. . . . She saw, but too well, though she strove not to see, that his affections were lost to her for ever.

It is impossible to imagine a period of greater pain and mortification than Mary passed, for about seven weeks. . . . She had come over to England, a country for which she, at this time, expressed "a repugnance, that almost amounted to horror," in search of happiness. She feared that that happiness had altogether escaped her; but she was encouraged by the eagerness and impatience which Mr. Imlay at length seemed to manifest for her arrival. When she saw him, all her fears were confirmed . . . the hopes she nourished were speedily blasted. Her reception by Mr. Imlay was cold and embarrassed. Discussions ("explanations" they were called) followed; cruel explanations, that only added to the anguish of a heart already overwhelmed in grief! . . .

Mary was incapable of sustaining her equanimity in this pressing emergency. "Love, dear, delusive love!" as she expressed herself to a friend some time afterwards, "rigorous reason had forced her to resign; and now her rational prospects were blasted, just as she had learned to be contented with rational enjoyments." Thus situated, life became an intolerable burthen. . . . She formed a desperate purpose to die.

. . . The agony of her mind determined her; and that determination gave her a sort of desperate serenity. She resolved to plunge herself in the Thames; and, not being satisfied with any spot nearer to London, she took a boat, and rowed to Putney. Her first thought had led her to Battersea-bridge, but she found it too public. It was night when she arrived at Putney,

and by that time had begun to rain with great violence. The rain suggested to her the idea of walking up and down the bridge, till her clothes were thoroughly drenched and heavy with the wet, which she did for half an hour without meeting a human being. She then leaped from the top of the bridge, but still seemed to find a difficulty in sinking, which she endeavoured to counteract by pressing her clothes closely round her. After some time she became insensible; but she always spoke of the pain she underwent as such, that, though she could afterwards have determined upon almost any other species of voluntary death, it would have been impossible for her to resolve upon encountering the same sensations again. I am doubtful, whether this is to be ascribed to the mere nature of suffocation, or was not rather owing to the preternatural action of a desperate spirit.

After having been for a considerable time insensible, she was recovered by the exertions of those by whom the body was found. She had sought, with cool and deliberate firmness, to put a period to her existence, and yet she lived to have every prospect of a long possession of enjoyment and happiness. It is perhaps not an unfrequent case with suicides, that we find reason to suppose, if they had survived their gloomy purpose, that they would, at a subsequent period, have been considerably happy. It arises indeed, in some measure, out of the very nature of a spirit of self-destruction; which implies a degree of anguish, that the constitution of the human mind will not suffer to remain long undiminished. This is a serious reflection. Probably no man would destroy himself from an impatience of present pain, if he felt a moral certainty that there were years of enjoyment still in reserve for him. It is perhaps a futile attempt, to think of reasoning with a man in that state of mind which precedes suicide. Moral reasoning is nothing but the awakening of certain feelings: and the feeling by which he is actuated, is too strong to leave us much chance of impressing him with other feelings, that should have force enough to counterbalance it. But, if the prospect of future tranquility and pleasure cannot be expected to have much weight with a man under an immediate purpose of suicide, it is so much the more to be wished, that men would impress their minds, in their sober moments, with a conception, which, being rendered habitual, seems to promise to act as a successful antidote in a paroxysm of desperation.

[A considerable amount of time later, Mary] set out upon a visit to the country, where she spent nearly the whole of the month of March. It was, I believe, while she was upon this visit, that some epistolary communication with Mr. Imlay, induced her resolutely to expel from her mind, all remaining doubt as to the issue of the affair.

Mary was now aware that every demand of forbearance towards him, of duty to her child, and even of indulgence to her own deep-rooted predilection, was discharged. She determined to rouse herself, and cast off for ever an attachment, which to her had been a spring of inexhaustible bitterness. Her present residence among the scenes of nature, was favourable to this purpose. She was at the house of an old and intimate friend, a lady of the name of Cotton, whose partiality for her was strong and sincere. Mrs. Cotton's nearest neighbour was Sir William East, baronet; and, from the joint effect of the kindness of her friend, and the hospitable and distinguishing attentions of this respectable family, she derived considerable benefit. She had been amused and interested in her journey to Norway; but with this difference, that, at that time, her mind perpetually returned with trembling anxiety to conjectures respecting Mr. Imlay's future conduct, whereas now, with a lofty and undaunted spirit, she threw aside every thought that recurred to him, while she felt herself called upon to make one more effort for life and happiness.

Be it observed, by the way, and I may be supposed best to have known the real state of the case, she never spoke of Mr. Imlay with acrimony, and was displeased when any person, in her hearing, expressed contempt of him. She was characterised by a strong sense of indignation; but her emotions of this sort were short-lived, and in no long time subsided into a dignified sereneness and equanimity. . . .

JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE (1762–1814)

from *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge* (expanded in Archive)

The philosopher of subjective idealism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, was born into poverty at Rammenau, Saxony, the son of a peasant. It is said that as a child, he attracted the attention of a nobleman by reciting verbatim a church sermon that the latter had missed. The nobleman, Freiherr von Militz, thereafter provided for Fichte's education: he was schooled at Pforta and later began as a student of theology at the University of Jena in 1780, leaving without a degree due to the death of his benefactor.

After some years as a tutor for a wealthy family in Zurich, Fichte studied the philosophy of Kant and wrote the Critique of All Revelation *(1792), which earned Kant's praise and was Fichte's first success. Fichte's name did not appear on the title page, and it was for a time believed to be the work of Kant. In this work, he applied Kant's ethical principle of duty to religion, and asserted that revealed religions are based on moral principles that are independent of the perceptible world.*

Through the help of Goethe, in 1794 Fichte became a professor at the University of Jena. He published two works that dealt with basic problems in epistemology and metaphysics, The Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge *(1794), and then the incomplete* Attempt at a New Presentation of the Science of Knowledge *(1797–98), on which his influence largely rests, followed by the* System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Science of Knowledge *(1798). In these works, Fichte continued to draw upon Kant for his ethics, but argued against Kant's notion of a thing-in-itself. Fichte's transcendental idealism accounted for freedom of action by situating it within the realm of the subject, or what appears to come from one's own mind. His publications in moral philosophy developed the idea that freedom is the object of moral action. One's experience of duty and moral law is the experience of the divine; only through moral striving can the individual ego be united with the "infinite ego," the spiritual activity that is the ground of self and world. At the height of his popularity, in 1798–99, Fichte published an article for which he was charged with atheism and, in a storm of controversy, was forced to leave Jena; he refused to accede to censure. Relocating to Berlin, he spent the rest of his life teaching and writing on topics in education, religion, and philosophy, and in the winter of 1807–08, during the Napoleon's siege of Berlin, delivered the patriotic lectures* Addresses to the German Nation, *the work for which he is most famous. Though his reign as Germany's preeminent philosopher was short-lived—his influence was quickly surpassed by Schelling and Hegel—he had a tremendous impact on German philosophy, providing a bridge from Kant's Transcendental Idealism*

to Hegel's Absolute Idealism. In 1814, after his wife Johanna had contracted typhus from nursing the wounded during Napoleon's siege, he contracted the disease from her and died.

In these selections from The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge *(1798), Fichte pursues an idealist account of the duty of self-preservation. The legacy of Kant is evident in his account of the individual as the "tool of the Moral Law," arguing that the continuation of one's own life is the exclusive condition, the* sine qua non, *of the "realization of the law through me." One has a duty to live, not for oneself or because it would bring oneself or others benefit, but because oneself is the kind of being only through which the moral law can be realized. Indeed, this is true of all persons; thus, I also have a duty to try to save others for the same reason. Exposing one's own life to danger may be one's duty in some cases, but one must never imagine death as a desired objective, and one must not voluntarily permit one's own death if it can be prevented.*

Source

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge*, Part 2, Book 5. Tr. A. E. Kroeger, ed. Dr. W. T. Harris. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1907, pp. 275–286.

from THE SCIENCE OF ETHICS AS BASED ON THE SCIENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

The Theory of Duties: Concerning the General Conditioned Duties

I am tool of the Moral Law in the sensuous world. But I am tool in the sensuous world solely on condition of a continuous reciprocal causality between me and the world, the way and manner of which is to be determined through my will; and since we speak here chiefly of a causality upon the world of rational beings, on condition of a continuous reciprocal causality between me and them. . . . If I am to be this tool of the Moral Law, then the condition under which alone I can be it, must take place; and if I think myself as under the rule of the Moral Law, I find myself commanded to realize this its condition; namely, the continued reciprocal causality between myself and the world of both rational and sensuous beings, so far as it is in my power to do so; for the Moral Law can never require the impossible. Hence all we have to do is to analyse this conception, and to relate the Moral Law to its several parts, in order to arrive at the general duty, whereof we ourselves are the immediate object, or at the general conditioned duties.

This reciprocal relation is to be *continuous*; the Moral Law commands our *preservation* as members of a sensuous world. In [my] *Science of Rights*, which knows nothing of a Moral Law and its commands, but establishes only the will of a free being as determined through natural necessity, we furnished the proof of the necessity to will our continuance in the following manner: I will something (X) signifies: the existence of this object shall be given to me in experience. But as sure as I *will* it, it is not so given in present experience, and is possible only in future. Hence, as sure as I will this experience, I also will, that I, the experiencing I, shall exist as the same identical I in a future moment. From this point of view respecting my will, I will my continuance only for the sake of a satisfaction, which I expect in the future.

The will of a free being, as determined through the Moral Law, has not this ground to will the continuance of the individual. Under the direction of this law, I do not care at all that something may be given to me in a future experience. Under it, X is to be absolutely without any reference to myself; it is to be utterly indifferent to me, whether *I* experience something or not, provided it only becomes actual in general, and provided I may presuppose that it will thus sometime become actual. The above demand of the natural man, that the object be given to him, is always the demand of an enjoyment. But from the standpoint of morality, enjoyment, as such, is never end. If I were told with more absolute certainty, that which you intend is certainly going to be realized, but you will never participate in it; annihilation is awaiting you before it will be realized; I would, nevertheless, be forced to work with the same exertion for its realization. The attainment of my true end would be assured to me; and the enjoyment thereof ought never to be my end. Hence the continuance of my life, and its consequent preservation, is not a duty to me for the sake of experiencing the realization of my end and aim. How then may it become my duty?

Whatsoever I may realize in the sensuous world is never the final end of morality, for that lies in the Infinitude, but only a means to draw nearer to this end. Hence the first end of all my actions is a new acting in the future; but whoever is to act in the future must live in it; and if he is to act in pursuance of a plan traced out now already, he must be and remain the same as he now is: his future existence must regularly develop itself from the present. Inspired by moral sentiment, I consider myself solely as a tool of the Moral Law. Hence I have the will to continue, and to continue to exist solely for the sake of acting. It is for this reason that self-preservation is a duty. This duty of *self-preservation* we now have to determine more closely. The preservation and regularly progressive development of the empirical self, which is regarded both as intelligence, or soul, and as body, is required. Hence both the health and regularly progressive development of soul and body considered in themselves, and the continuation of their unchecked mutual influence upon each other, is object of the Moral Law.

The requirement of the Moral Law in this respect is to be regarded, firstly, *negatively*, as a prohibition: *Undertake nothing which, in your own consciousness, might endanger the preservation of yourself in the stated meaning of the word*; and secondly, positively, as a command: *Do whatever according to your best conviction promotes this preservation of yourself.*

I. . . . When that law does require it, I am absolutely obliged to do so, no matter how great the danger and risk may be; for it is my absolute end to do what duty requires, and my self-preservation is only a means for this end. How such a command of duty to risk one's self-preservation may arise, this is not the proper place to explain. We shall take up the subject on this point in the doctrine concerning absolute duties. The investigation concerning the morality of *suicide*, belongs, however, to the subject in the present place; and we shall settle it now.

. . . The decision rests upon the following: My life is the exclusive condition of the realization of the law through me. Now the command is addressed to me absolutely: to realize the law. Hence I am absolutely commanded to live, so far as this depends upon me. To destroy my life by my own hands is directly contradictory of this; and hence is immoral. I cannot destroy my own life at all without withdrawing myself, so far as I am concerned, from the rule of the moral law; but this that law can never command, because it would in doing so contradict itself. If I am influenced by the moral law—and this I ought to be and must be considered as being, when my actions are judged of—then I will to live solely to do my duty. I will not live any longer, would, therefore signify: I will no longer do my duty.

. . . To convince himself of the correctness of these views, let the reader examine all possible grounds of an act of suicide. The first motive, of which instances are said to have occurred, is a despair to get rid of and conquer certain vices, which have become a habit, and almost our own second nature. But this very despair is an immoral feeling. If you only have the true will, there is no difficulty about the canning. What, indeed, could have compulsory power over our will? Or what could put the power wherewith we sin, in motion, except our will? Hence in this case the confession is clear that the suicide does not will his duty. He cannot tolerate life without vice, and rather would compromise with virtue by the easier means of death, than conform to its requirement of a guiltless life.

Another possible motive is that a person should kill himself to escape suffering something infamous and vicious, becoming thus the object of another's vices, but in this case he does not kill himself to escape vice, for if he only suffers in the matter, *i.e.*, if he cannot resist with the exertion of all his physical forces, that which he is made to undergo, then it is not any crime of his. He only escapes through death the injustice, violence, or disgrace, inflicted upon him, but not sin, since he does not commit any sin himself. He kills himself, because an enjoyment is taken away from him, without which he cannot tolerate life. But in that case he has not denied himself, and has not, as he ought to have done, sacrificed all other considerations to virtue.

Some men have accused suicides of cowardice, others have celebrated their courage. Both parties are in the right, as is usually the case in disputes of rational men. The matter has two sides, and both parties have only looked each at one. It is necessary to consider it from both sides, for injustice must not be done even to what is most horrible, since thereby only contradiction is excited.

The resolve to die is the purest representation of the superiority of thought over nature. In nature lies the impulse to preserve itself, and the resolve to die is the exact opposite of this impulse. Each suicide, committed with cool considerateness—the most of suicides are committed in a fit of senselessness, and concerning such a condition nothing can rationally be said—is an illustration of this superiority, a proof of great strength of soul, and necessarily excites esteem, when reviewed from this side. It proceeds from the above-described blind impulse to be absolutely self-determined, and is only met with in an energetic character. Courage is resoluteness to meet an unknown future. Now, since the suicide annihilates all future for himself, we cannot ascribe true courage to him, unless indeed he assumes a life after death, and goes to meet this life with the firm resolve to fight or bear whatsoever that life shall have in store for him.

But whatever strength of soul it may require to resolve to die, it requires far more courage to bear a life which can only have sorrow in store for us hereafter, which we esteem as worth nothing in itself, even though it could be made the most joyous life, and to bear it nevertheless merely so as not to do anything unworthy of ourself. If in the first instance we have superiority of the conception over nature, we have here superiority of the conception itself over the conception: autonomy and absolute independence of thought. Whatsoever lies outside of the thought lies outside of myself, and is indifferent to me. If the former is the triumph of thought, this is the triumph of its law, the purest representation of morality; for nothing higher can be asked of man than that he should continue to bear a life which has grown to be insupportable to him. This courage the suicide lacks, and in so far he can be called cowardly. In comparison with the virtuous man he is a coward; but in comparison with the wicked, who submits to disgrace and slavery merely so as to continue for a few more years the wretched feeling of his existence, he is a hero. . . .

EPHRAIM ZALMAN MARGOLIOTH (1762–1828)

from *Bet Efrayim*

Ephraim Zalman Margolioth, a Galician rabbi, was the author of many commentaries esteemed as authoritative within the Jewish tradition. He was born in Brody, Poland, Dec. 19, 1762, and began to distinguish himself as a Talmudic scholar at a young age. Before the age of 20, Margolioth was corresponding with the foremost scholars of Talmudic thought; in 1785, he was a appointed a rabbi of Brody. He eventually became head of his own yeshivah, *or Talmudic academy, and mentored many pupils to their appointment as rabbis.*

Among Margolioth's many works is his collected responsa, Bet Efrayim *(2 vols., 1809–10), including a commentary on the* Yoreh De'ah. *In its short passage concerning suicide, Margolioth makes several important points. First, in a discussion of the rites associated with suicides, he maintains that self-killing may constitute an act of repentance, in which case suicide is permitted. Second, he argues that Saul's suicide [q.v., under Hebrew Bible] was licit because Saul, by killing himself, avoided a mocking death by torture at the hands of the Philistines and because it was prophesied that Saul would soon die. Margolioth also cites other sources that excuse suicides which result from indigence or grief and do not subject them to the law of suicides described in the Talmud [q.v. under* Babylonian Talmud*]. He appears to second the view that he cites from the* Besamim Rosh *that a "suicide is [only] someone who despises God's good like the philosophers" and not someone with a good reason to despair.*

Source

Ephraim Zalman Margolioth, *Bet Efrayim YD, 76*, tr. Baruch Brody.

from BET EFRAYIM

Since he did not say first [that he intended to kill himself], how do we know that he did it from spite? Perhaps he did it as an act of repentance, and all who commit suicide as an act of repentance have done a permissible act. . . . We also find in *Besamim Rosh*, that was recently printed, that a suicide is someone who despises God's good like the philosophers, but someone who says that my life is a burden on me because of my poverty is not a suicide. It is true that his proof from Saul is no proof, as Nachmanides and the other commentators explain. Saul knew that he was going to die because of the prophecy of Samuel, who told him that he and his sons would die. Since [what is lost] is only a brief period of remaining life, it [killing oneself] is permitted, so that he would not be mocked. Nevertheless, he may be right. . . . We certainly find in the Talmud many who committed suicide out of anguish. As in the case of the woman with her seven sons. . . . It is implausible to say about her that she was afraid that she would be forced to sin, as Tosafot says about the children who jumped into the sea.

ANNE LOUISE GERMAINE DE STAËL-HOLSTEIN (1766–1817)

from *On the Influence of the Passions* (expanded in Archive)

from *Reflections on Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Anne Louise Germaine née Necker, Baroness of Staël-Holstein, widely known as Madame de Staël, was an important Swiss-French writer known for her work in literary criticism and for her novels. She was the daughter of a politician, Jacques Necker; in 1786, she married the Swedish ambassador to France, Baron de Staël-Holstein, in a marriage of convenience. Her first works were romantic love stories, but success came with her letters on Rousseau. She was much involved in the events of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, defending her friends among the liberal aristocrats, often at the peril of her own life. Her literary contributions are considerable, including The Influence of Literature on Society *(1800), and the novels* Delphine *(1802) and* Corinne *(1807). She published a lengthy work on German philosophy and literature,* On Germany, *in 1810, which attempted to stimulate France to fresh creativity, idealizing the German Romantic movement in an implicit critique of Napoleon's France. All 5,000 copies of the printed book (2 vols.), the plates, and the manuscript were confiscated and destroyed by Napoleon, and only the quick action of her son saved a copy of the manuscript, which was published three years later in London. She was banished from France by Napoleon. She also published works on Rousseau and on the French Revolution.*

Mme. de Staël, in one respect nearly unique among authors on suicide, published two starkly different views of self-killing. In 1798, in On the Influence of the Passions, *she defended suicide as a valid solution to what she refers to as the unhappiness of "passionate minds." Later, however, she rejected this view in* Reflections on Suicide *(1812), arguing resolutely against it. She gives the following account of this turnabout: "In my work* On the Influence of the Passions *I have applauded suicide and I have ever since repented of that inconsiderate expression. I was then in the pride and vivacity of early youth, but of what use is life, without the hope of improvement." The work concludes with her reconstruction of Lady Jane Grey's last days in the Tower of London, considering—and rejecting—the option of suicide.*

Sources

Baroness of Staël-Holstein, *A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations*, tr. K. Staël-Holstein. London: George Cawthorne, [1789] 1798; Madame de Staël, *Reflections on Suicide*, in George Combe, *The Constitution of Man, Considered in Relation to Eternal Objects*, Alexandrian edition. Columbus, OH: J & H Miller, n.d., second half of volume, pp. 99–112.

from ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE PASSIONS

. . . [O]f all the passions, love is the most fatal to the happiness of man. If we had the courage to die, we might venture to indulge the hope of so delightful a fate, but we resign our minds to the empire of feelings which poison the rest of our life. For some moments we enjoy a happiness which has no correspondence with the ordinary state of life, and we wish to survive its loss. The instinct of self preservation is more powerful than the emotions of despair, and we continue to exist without being able to indulge the hope of recovering in the future what the past has taken from us, without being able to find any reason to abandon our sorrow, either in the circle of the passions, in the sphere even of a sentiment which, deriving its source in a real principle, can admit of no consolation from reflection. None but men capable of resolving to commit suicide, can with any shadow of wisdom, venture to explore this grand path of happiness.*

But he who desires to live, and exposes himself to the necessity of retreat; he who desires to live, and yet renounces in any manner the empire over his own mind, devotes himself, like a madman, to the greatest of misfortunes.

The majority of men, and even a great number of women, have no idea of this sentiment, such as I have described it; and there are more people qualified to appreciate the merit of Newton than to judge of the real passion of love. A kind of ridicule is attached to what are called romantic sentiments; and those little minds, who assign so much importance to all the details of their self-love or of their interest, have arrogated to themselves a superior degree of reason to those whose character hurries them into a different kind of selfishness, which society considers with greater indulgence in the man who is occupied exclusively with himself. . . . But, indeed, so many fleeting emotions bear a resemblance to love, so many attachments of quite a different nature, among women from vanity, among men from youth, take the appearance of this sentiment, that these degraded copies have almost entirely effaced the remembrance of the real object. In a word, there are certain characters prone to love, who, deeply convinced of the obstacles which oppose the happiness of this passion, which thwart its perfection, and, above all, threaten its permanence; and alarmed at the irritability of their own hearts, and those of others, reject, with courageous reason and timid sensibility, every thing that could excite this passion. From all these causes arise the errors adopted even by philosophers with regard to the real importance of the attachment of the heart, and the unbounded tortures which those who resign themselves to its guidance are accustomed to experience.

. . . If, on the contrary, there has been a single moment of life in which we have been beloved; if the object on whom we had fixed our choice was generous, was in any respect such as we had conceived him to be; and if time, the inconstancy of the imagination, which likewise loosens the attachments of the heart; or if another object less worthy of his tenderness has deprived us of that love on which our whole existence depended, how agonizing are the sufferings which we experience from this overthrow of our scheme of life! How poignant the

* I am afraid least I be accused of having, in the course of this work, spoken of suicide as an act deserving of praise.

tortures of that moment when the hand, which so often has traced the most sacred oaths of the eternal love, traces in characters, that stab to the heart, the cruel intelligence, that we have ceased to be the objects of affection! Oh! How painful, when comparing the letters which the same hand had written, our eyes can scarcely believe that the different periods at which they were composed, can alone explain the difference! How agonizing our sensations, when that voice, whose accents haunted us in solitude, thrilled through our agitated soul, and seemed to recall the fondest recollections; when that voice speaks to us without emotion, without embarrassment, without betraying the slightest movement of the heart! Alas! The passion we still feel, long renders it impossible to believe that we cease to interest the object of our tenderness. We seem to experience a sentiment which requires to be communicated. We imagine that we are separated by a barrier independent of his will; that when we see, when we speak to him, the feelings of the past will revive; that he will again yield to the tenderness he once experienced; we imagine that hearts, which have once completely unbosomed themselves, cannot cease to cherish the ancient union; we imagine that nothing can renew the impulse which we alone possess the secret of bestowing; yet we know that he is happy far from us, that he is happy with the object least calculated to bring back the recollection of us. The cords of sympathy remain in our hearts, but those which once vibrated in concert to them are annihilated. We must for ever forego the sight of him whose presence would renew our remembrance of the past, and whose conversation would render it still more poignant. We are condemned to wander over the scenes in which he loved us, over those scenes that remain unaltered, to attest the change which all the rest has undergone. Despair is rooted in our hearts, while a thousand duties, while pride itself imposes the necessity of concealment, and no outward sign of woe must challenge the attention of pity. Alone in secret, our whole being is changed from life to death.

What consolation can the world afford to grief like this? The courage of self slaughter! But in this situation even the aid of this terrible act is stripped of that consolation which it sometimes is supposed to bestow. The hope of exciting the interest of others when we are no more, that species of immortality, is for ever torn from her who no longer hopes that her death could inspire regret. It is indeed a most cruel death, to be unable either to afflict, to punish, or to engage the remembrance of the object by whom we are betrayed; and to leave him in the possession of her whom he prefers, inspires a sensation of anguish which extends beyond the grave, as if this idea would haunt us even in its silent retreat.

. . . But it may be asked, why, under the supposed pressure of so painful a situation, the relief of suicide is not more frequently resorted to; for death, after all, is the sole remedy against irreparable ills? But though it but rarely happens, that the profligate lay violent hands upon themselves, it is not, therefore, to be inferred, that the profligate are less unhappy and miserable than those who resolve upon and perpetrate suicide; and, without laying the least stress on that vague uncertain dread, with which the apprehension of what may follow this life, never ceases to haunt the mind of the guilty; there is something in the very act of suicide that argues a sensibility of disposition, and a cast of philosophy, which are altogether foreign to the nature of a depraved soul.

If we fling out of this mortal life, in order to rescue ourselves from the torments of the heart, we are not without a wish that our loss should be somewhat regretted; if we resolve upon suicide from an utter disrelish of existence, which enables us to appreciate the destiny of man, deep and serious reflections, long and repeated examinations of our own mind, must necessarily

have preceded that resolution; but the malice with which the heart of the wicked man rankles against his enemies, would make him dread that his death would enable them to breathe in security;—the rage that agitates him, far from disgusting him with life, on the contrary, makes him cling to it with a kind of rancorous rapture; a certain degree of pain dispirits and fatigues; but the irritation that accompanies the perpetration of crimes, makes the criminal fasten upon existence with a mixture of fury and of fear; he beholds in it a kind of prey which he pursues for the pleasure of tearing it in pieces. . . .

That courage which enables a man to brave the terrors of death, bears not the least affinity to the disposition that resolves upon self destruction. The greatest criminals may evince intrepidity in the midst of dangers: with them it is an effect of mad folly, a kind of resource, an emotion, a hope that prompts to action; but those very men, though the most miserable of mortal beings, scarcely ever attempt to cut short their existence; whether it be, that Providence has not armed them with this sublime resource, or that there is in the nature of guilt itself a kind of ardent selfishness, which, while it affords no enjoyment, excludes those elevated sentiments with which the boon of protracted existence is spurned and renounced.

Alas! How difficult would it be not to take an interest in the fate of a man who rises superior to nature, when he throws away what he holds from her; when he converts life into an instrument to destroy life; when he can prevail upon himself, by energy of soul, to subdue the most powerful movement of the human breast, the instinct of self-preservation! How difficult would it be not to suppose some generous impulse in the heart of the man whom repentance should drive to the act of suicide!—It is indeed not to be lamented that the truly wicked are incapable of such a resolve; it would, doubtless, be a painful punishment to an honourable soul, not to be able to hold in sovereign contempt a being which it can only loath and execrate.

. . . I have already observed, that he who can place suicide among the number of his resolves may fearlessly enter and run the career of the passions: to the passions he may consign his life, if he be but conscious of sufficient resolution to cut short its thread the moment that the thunderbolt of Fate shall have blasted and destroyed the object of all his wishes and of all his cares. But as a kind of instinct, which belongs, I believe, more to our physical than to our moral nature, frequently compels us to preserve a life, every instant of which is marked and marred by misfortune, can it be conceived an easy matter to run the almost certain chance of plunging into misery that will make us execrate existence, and of a disposition of the soul that fills us with the dread of its dissolution? and this, not because, under such a situation life can still have any charms, but because we must compress into one moment's space all the incentives of our grief, in order to struggle against the ever-recurring thought of death; and because misfortune spreads itself over the whole extent of life; while the terrors that suicide inspires concentrate themselves into the space of an instant: and, in order to effect the act of self-murder, a man must take in the picture of his misfortunes, like the spectacle of his final end, aided by the intense energy of one sentiment and of one single idea.

Nothing, however, inspires more horror than the possibility of existing purely and simply; and that, for want of sufficient resolution to die. For, as it is our fate to be exposed to all the vehement passions, such an object of dread suffices to make us cherish that power of philosophy, which supports man at the level of the events of life, without either attaching him to it too closely, or making him shrink from it with undue abhorrence.

from REFLECTIONS ON SUICIDE

To His Highness The Prince Royal of Sweden.

Stockholm, December, 1812

My Lord,

I wrote these Reflections on Suicide, at a time when misfortune rendered the solace of meditation necessary to sustain me. You, my lord, have ever considered death only in the light of devotion to your country; your mind has never been touched by the mortification which sometimes afflicts those who believe themselves useless upon earth. . . . I am with respect, my lord,

Your royal highness'
most humble, and obedient servant,

NECKAR.
Baroness de Stael-Holstein

I would impart consolation to the afflicted: . . . reflection is their best asylum, since separated by adversity from the distractions of the world, they fly to self-examination, and endeavor, like the invalid on the couch of pain, to find every alleviation of suffering.

Excess of misery gives birth to the idea of suicide, and this subject cannot be too thoroughly investigated: it involves the whole moral organization of man. . . . I will examine the subject without prejudice or pride. We ought not to be offended with those who are so wretched as to be unable to support the burden of existence, nor should we applaud those, who sink under its weight, since, to sustain it, would be a greater proof of their moral strength.*

The opponents of suicide, feeling themselves on the ground of duty and reason, too often employ, in support of their arguments, an intolerant manner, offensive to their adversaries; and also frequently mingle unjust invective against enthusiasm, generally, with their well-merited reprobation of an unjustifiable action. It appears to me, on the contrary, that we can easily demonstrate from the principles themselves of true enthusiasm, or, in other words, from the love of pure morality, how far resignation to destiny is superior to rebellion against it.

I propose to present the question of suicide in three different points of view: I shall first examine what is the influence of suffering on the mind; secondly, I shall show, 'what are the laws which the Christian religion impose on us in relation to suicide;' and thirdly, I shall consider 'in what consists the greatest moral dignity of man in this world.'

What Is the Influence of Suffering on the Mind?

. . . [O]f all the limits of the understanding, the most grievous is that which prevents us from comprehending one another.

It appears to me that happiness consists in a destiny harmonizing with our faculties. Our desires are the offspring of the moment, and often are of fatal consequence to us; but our faculties

* In my work 'On the Influence of the Passions' I have applauded suicide, and I have ever since repented of that inconsiderate expression. I was then in all the pride and vivacity of early youth; but of what use is life, without the hope of improvement?

are permanent, and their necessities are unceasing: hence the conquest of the world may have been as necessary to Alexander, as the possession of a cottage to a shepherd. . . .

A capacity to love, an activity of mind, a value attached to opinion, are the sources of happiness to some and altogether productive of infelicity to others, the inflexible law of duty is the same for all, but moral strength is purely individual; and in forming an opinion of the happiness or unhappiness of those who are constituted differently from ourselves, a profound knowledge of the human heart is essential to the philosophical and just conclusion.

It appears to me then that we should never dispute the feelings of others; counsel can only operate on conduct, the laws of religion and virtue providing alike for all situations; but the causes of misery, and its intensity, vary equally with circumstances and individuals. We might as well attempt to count the waves of the sea, as to analyze the combinations of destiny and character. . . .

Physical and moral pain are one and the same thing in their effect upon the mind; for corporeal and mental affliction are both productive of pain; but the one destroys the body, while the other regenerates the soul.

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If reflection and feeling lead us to believe that there is ever, in the ways of providence, a latent or apparent justice, we cannot consider suffering as either accidental or arbitrary. . . . In short, on what ground do his complaints rest? Is it against the system of the universe that he rebels, or against the part allotted to him in a system, subject to immutable laws? Affliction is one of the essential elements of the means of happiness; and it is impossible to form a conception of the one without the other. The vivacity of our desires is always in proportion to the difficulties with which they have contend; the height of our enjoyments, to the fear of losing them; the strength of our affections, to the dangers which menace the objects of our regard. In a word, the Gordian knot of pleasure and of pain can only be severed by the stroke that terminates existence. Let us submit, say the unfortunate, to the balance of good and evil . . . and yet the regulator which determines the result of this balance is entirely within ourselves: the same sort of life, which reduces one to despair, would fill another with joy . . . the happiness of one may not accord with the character of another; but resignation belongs equally to all. . . .

There is no doubt of our coming forth, sensibly improved, from the trials of adversity, when we submit to them with a becoming fortitude. . . . We then abandon virtue when we fly to suicide as a refuge from misfortune; we reject the enjoyments that virtue would bestow by enabling us to triumph over our distresses. The disciples of Plato said that 'the soul had need of a certain period of sojournment upon earth to become purified from guilty passions.' . . . Human existence, rightly conceived, is but the abdication of personality to gain admission into universal order. . . . In treating of the moral dignity of man, I shall strenuously insist upon the difference which exists between suicide and self-devotion, that is to say, between the sacrifice of ourselves to others, or which is the same thing, to virtue; and the renunciation of existence because it is a burden to us. . . .

It is nevertheless wrong to contend that suicide is an act of cowardice: this strained assertion never convinced any one; but we ought here to distinguish between courage and fortitude. The act of suicide implies contempt of death, but to be unable to endure suffering shows a want of fortitude. There is one cause of suicide which interests the hearts of most women: it is love. The spell of this passion is no doubt the principal cause of the errors we commit in our judgment on the question of self-destruction. We are willing that love should subjugate the highest powers of the soul, and that nothing should be beyond his empire . . . of all the miseries of love there is but one, it appears to me, which should subdue the energy of the soul; it is the death of the object we love and by whom we are beloved.

A misfortune entirely free from all emotion of pride is then the only one which should lead to suicide; but for the very reason that such a misfortune originates entirely in sensibility, religion can deprive it of its bitterness. Providence, which desires not that the wounds of the human soul should be without a cure, brings relief to him whom he has afflicted beyond his strength. Often, at such a time, the wings of the angel of peace overshadow our dejected heads, and who can say that this angel is not the very object of our regret? . . .

. . . The most frequent causes of suicide in modern times are ruin and dishonor. A reverse of fortune, as society is constituted, produces a most acute unhappiness, which multiplies itself in a thousand different ways. The most cruel of all, however, is the loss of the rank we occupied in the world. Imagination has as much to do with the past, as with the future, and we form with our possessions an alliance, whose rupture is most grievous; but, after a time, a new situation presents a new perspective to almost all men. Happiness is so composed of relative sensations, that it is not things in themselves, but their connection with yesterday and to-morrow, which affects the imagination. . . .

. . . Repentance is necessarily connected with our ideas of divine justice, for if we did not regulate our actions by this supreme standard of equity, we should experience in life nothing but discontent. We must consider existence in two points of view; either as a game, the gain or loss of which consists in the advantages of this world; or as a noviciate for immortality. If we regard it as a game, we shall be able to trace in our own conduct only the consequences of true or false reasoning; if we have the life to come in view, it is intention only to which our conscience clings. The man whose views are limited to the interests of this world may suffer discontent, but repentance belongs only to the religious man; and being such, he necessarily feels that expiation is the first duty, and that conscience commands us to endure the consequences of our transgressions, to the end that we may repair them, if possible, by doing good. . . .

I believe we may affirm that unmerited dishonor is never of long duration. The influence of truth on the public is such, that patience only is requisite to restore us to our station. . . .

I believe we may boldly affirm, that all who have resorted to an active and steady employment have found an alleviation of their distress. There is an object in all occupations, and it is an object that man constantly requires. Our faculties devour us, like the vulture of Prometheus, when they have no external cause of action, and employment exercises and directs these faculties: in short, when we possess imagination, and most people in sorrow have a great deal, we can always find renovated pleasure in the master-pieces of the human mind, either as amateurs of artists. Occupation gives a zest to existence, and the fine arts contain, at the same time, the originality of particular objects, and the grandeur of universal ideas. . . .

What Are the Laws which the Christian Religion Imposes on Us, in Relation to Suicide?

When the ancient man of sorrows, Job, was stricken with every evil, when he had lost his fortune and his children, and when frightful physical afflictions made him suffer a thousand deaths, his wife advised him to renounce life. 'Curse god,' said she, 'and die.'—'What,' replied he, 'I have received good at the hand of god, and shall I not receive evil?' And in whatsoever depth of despair he was plunged, he was resigned to his fate, and his patience was rewarded.

It is supposed that Job preceded Moses; he existed, at least, long before the coming of Jesus Christ, and at a time when the hope of the soul's immortality was not yet assured to mankind. What would he then have thought at the present time? We see in the bible, men, such as Samson and the Maccabees, who devoted themselves to death, to accomplish a design they believed to be noble and salutary; but in no part do we find examples of suicide, of which disgust to life or its troubles is the only cause; in no part has that species of suicide, which is only a desertion from destiny, been considered as possible. It has been frequently asserted, that there is no passage in the gospel which indicates a formal disapprobation of this act. Jesus Christ, in his discourses, rather ascends to the principles of action than enters into a particular application of the law; but is it not enough, that the general spirit of the gospel tends to hallow resignation?

'Blessed are they that mourn,' said Jesus Christ, 'for they shall be comforted. If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, for my sake.' Jesus Christ every where announces that his mission is, to teach man that the design of misfortune is the purification of the soul, and that celestial happiness is obtained by pious endurance of our miseries on earth. The interpretation of the doubtful meaning of affliction, is the special intention of the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

We find many good things respecting social morality in the Hebrew prophets and in the Pagan philosophers; but it was to teach charity, patience, and faith, that Jesus Christ descended upon earth; and these three virtues all alike tend to the relief of the unhappy. The first, charity, teaches us our duty towards them; the second, patience, teaches them to what consolations they ought to have recourse, and the third faith, announces to them their recompense. . . .

. . . Premeditated suicide is incompatible with Christian faith, because this faith rests chiefly on the different duties of resignation. With respect to suicide resulting from a moment of delirium, from an excess of despair . . . the divine legislator . . . appears to have considered the faults of the passions as the disease of the soul, and not as its habitual state, and always to have appealed rather to the general spirit of morality than to the precepts which grow out of circumstances.

Jesus Christ constantly directed man to occupy himself with life as it has relation to immortality only. 'Then, why take ye thought for raiment,' said he, 'consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin; yet Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.' It is not slothfulness nor indifference that Jesus Christ inculcates by this passage, but a sort of calm which would be useful even as it regards the interests of this world. . . . We believe we can obtain our emancipation from the tyranny of human events by determining to destroy ourselves if we do not attain the end of our desires. Under this idea, we consider ourselves as entirely at our own disposal; and free to relinquish life when we are no longer content with the condition of it . . . when we renounce life, merely because we are not happy, we prefer ourselves to all the world, and become, if I may be allowed the expression, egotists in suicide. . . .

The last scene of the life of Jesus Christ appears destined, above all, to confound those who believe they have the right to destroy themselves in order to escape misfortune. The dread of suffering seized upon him, who had voluntarily devoted himself to the death, as well as to the life of man. He prayed a long time to his father, on the mount of Olives, and his soul was exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death. 'My father,' cried he, 'if it be possible let this cup pass from me!' Three times he repeated this prayer, his countenance bathed in tears. . . . 'Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done, O, my father,' and replaced himself in the hands of his enemies. What more would we seek in the gospel on resignation in affliction, and the duty of supporting it with courage and

patience? The resignation we obtain from religious faith is a species of moral suicide, and it is in that it so much differs from suicide, properly so called, for the renunciation of self has for its end the sacrifice of ourselves to our fellow creatures; while suicide, caused by a disgust of life, is only the bloody mourning of personal happiness. . . .

Oh! What despair is required for such an act! May pity, the most profound pity, be granted to him who is guilty of it! But, at least, let him not mingle human pride with it. Let not the wretch believe himself the more a man, for being the less a Christian, and let a reflecting being know ever where to place the true moral dignity of man.

Of the Moral Dignity of Man

[W]e will examine with attention in what the moral dignity of man consists; and this examination will lead us necessarily to judge the action of self-destruction under two opposite points of view; the sacrifice inspired by virtue, and the disgust which results from mistaken passions. . . .

The characteristic of the true moral dignity of man, is devotion to duty. Elevation of soul constantly tends to free us from what is purely individual, for the purpose of uniting us to the great views of the creator of the universe. Love and reflection comfort and exalt us only by withdrawing us from all egotistical impressions. Devotion and enthusiasm infuse a purer air into our breasts. Self-love, irritation, impatience, are the enemies against which conscience obliges us to combat, and the tissue of our lives is almost entirely composed of the continual action and reaction of internal strength against external circumstances, and of external circumstances against internal strength. . . .

Hegesippus of Cyrene, a disciple of Aristippus, discoursed in favor of suicide as well as sensuality. He contended that man should have no object but pleasure in this world; but as it is very difficult to insure our own enjoyments, he advised death to those who could not obtain them. This doctrine is one of those by which we can best determine the motives of suicide, and it evinces the species of egotism which mingles, as I have before observed, in the very act by which we would annihilate ourselves.

There are two ways of sacrificing life, either because we give duty the preference, or because we give our passions this preference, in not wishing to live when we have lost the hope of happiness. This last sentiment cannot merit esteem: but to fortify ourselves by our own thoughts, in the midst of the reverses of life; to make ourselves a defense against ourselves, in opposing the calm of conscience to the irritation of temperament: this is true courage, in comparison with which, that which springs from instinct, is very little, and that which is the fruit of self-love, still less. . . .

The gift of existence is a constant miracle; the thoughts and feelings, which compose it, have something so sublime in them, that we cannot, without astonishment, contemplate our being by the aid of the faculties of this being. Shall we then squander, in a moment of impatience and ennui, the breath by which we have felt love, recognized genius, and adored the deity?

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In short, if we are incapable of that Christian resignation, which makes us submit to the ordeal of life, at least we should return to the classical beauty of character of the ancients, and make glory our divinity, when we do not feel ourselves able to sacrifice this glory itself to the highest of all virtues.

We believe we have shown that suicide, whose end is, to rid ourselves of life, carries with it no character of devotion to duty, and cannot, of course, merit the name of enthusiasm.

GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL (1770–1831)

from *Philosophy of Right*

Born to a Protestant family in Stuttgart, Hegel received an excellent early education. He studied philosophy and theology at the seminary of Tübingen, where he was particularly influenced by the works of Kant and Schiller. After passing his theological examinations in 1793, Hegel worked in Bern and Frankfurt as a tutor for several years.

Among the German idealists, Hegel attempted to formulate a complete system of philosophy that would account for the differences and similarities of all previous philosophies. In 1801, with a dissertation written in Latin entitled On the Orbits of the Planets, *Hegel secured a lectureship at the University of Jena, where he spoke on a wide variety of subjects. On October 13, 1806, the same day that Napoleon victoriously entered the city, he finished his* Phenomenology of Spirit. *In this work, an early masterpiece much influenced by German Romanticism, Hegel describes the process by which both individuals and societies can grow to "absolute knowledge" by developing consciousness from sense perceptions to reason, which is the ultimate essence of the world and the guiding principle of history. Reconciliation is reached when a concept progresses through an endless dialectical process; thesis leads to antithesis, which finally leads to synthesis, which itself inherently contains a contrasting element that negates it and serves as the antithesis in the next stage of development.*

Due to the war, Hegel left Jena and eventually settled in Nürnberg, where he served as headmaster of the Royal Gymnasium, met his future wife, and wrote the Science of Logic *(1812–16). In 1816, he resumed his academic career at the University of Heidelberg and published* The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline *(1817), which serves as an introduction to his philosophy. His major work of his last period was the* Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, *or* Elements of the Philosophy of Right, *known in English as the* Philosophy of Right *(published 1820, title page 1821), which argues that the nation-state is a manifestation of God and that the ideal state is the real materialization of the ethical idea. The work was heavily criticized as a hidden apologia for the Prussian state., but more recent scholarship challenges this view. Hegel's philosophy of government and law became highly influential in Prussia, and Hegel himself became a power in the political and academic life of Germany. He died suddenly, at the peak of his career, from an attack of cholera.*

In this brief selection from the Philosophy of Right, *along with an addition made by Hegel's students from his oral lectures and comments, Hegel argues that there is no right to suicide since there is no right over one's own life—indeed, the concept is a contradiction. Central to Hegel's thinking is the notion of the individual as secondary to moral and societal interests; "the particular person," he says, "is really a subordinate, who must devote his life to the service of the ethical fabric."*

Source

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* Paragraph 70 and Addition, tr. S. W. Dyde. London: George Bell and Sons, 1896, p. 76.

from PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT

Since personality is something directly present, the comprehensive totality of one's outer activity, the life, is not external to it. Thus the disposal or sacrifice of life is not the manifestation of one's personality so much as the very opposite. Hence I have no right to relinquish my life. Only a moral and social ideal, which submerges the direct, simple and separate personality, and constitutes its real power, has a right to life. Life, as such, being direct and unreflected, and death the direct negation of it, death must come from without as a result of natural causes, or must be received in the service of the idea from a foreign hand.

The particular person is really a subordinate, who must devote his life to the service of the ethical fabric; when the state demands his life, he must yield it up. But should the man take his own life? Suicide may at first glance be looked upon as bravery, although it be the poor bravery of tailors and maid-servants. Or it may be regarded as a misfortune, caused by a broken heart. But the point is, Have I any right to kill myself? The answer is that I, as this individual am not lord over my own life, since the comprehensive totality of one's activity, the life, falls within the direct and present personality. To speak of the right of a person over his life is a contradiction, since it implies a right of a person over himself. But no one can stand above and execute himself. When Hercules burnt himself, and Brutus fell upon his sword, this action against their personality was doubtless of an heroic type; but yet the simple right to commit suicide must be denied even to heroes.

NOVALIS (1772–1801)

from *The Novices of Sais* (expanded in Archive)

Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg was a lyric poet of German Romanticism and a prose writer of encyclopedic talent; he wrote under the nom de plume Novalis. He was born into a family descended from the low German nobility; his father, a deeply pietistic man, managed a salt mine, as well as the family estate in the Harz mountains. Novalis was educated in law at Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg. At age 22, he fell in love with the 12-year-old Sophie von Kühn and became engaged to be married, but was devastated when she died, at the age of 15. During this time, he was first introduced to the philosophy of Johann Fichte [q.v], who would be a main influence on his later work.

His prose lyrics Hymnen an die Nacht *(*Hymns to the Night, *1800), written after Sophie's death in 1797, show his mediated, universal religiosity, the view that there must be an intermediary between man and God, not necessarily a cleric or divine figure, but in this case, the beloved—now dead. Novalis later studied geology, chemistry, biology, history, mathematics, mining, and philosophy; these contributed to his anticipated encyclopedia project. He died of tuberculosis at age 29.*

The novel fragment The Novices of Sais *(1802) reflects Novalis's fascination with universal science; in particular, this short work explores the possibility of using poetry to describe a universal world harmony. In this context, Novalis alludes to the notion of universal suicide, imagining nature as hostile and man able to free himself from this threat only if all of humankind were to bring their lives to an end.*

Source

Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, tr. Ralph Manheim. New York: Curt Valentin, 1949; New York: Archipelago Books, 2005, pp. 19–45.

from THE NOVICES OF SAIS

. . . Now to some it seems not worth the trouble to pursue the infinite divisions of nature, and moreover, they find it a dangerous undertaking without fruit or issue. Never can we find the smallest grain or the simplest fiber of a solid body, since all magnitude loses itself forwards and backwards in infinity, and the same applies to the varieties of bodies and forces; we encounter forever new species, new combinations, new phenomena, and so on to infinity. They seem to stand still only when our fervor wanes; we waste the precious time in vain study and tedious enumeration, and this in the end becomes a true madness, a fatal vertigo over the horrid abyss. And nature, they say, remains wherever we turn a terrible mill of death: everywhere monstrous change, indissoluble endless chain, realm of voracity and mad luxuriance, incommensurable and fraught with disaster; the few bright points, they say, only serve to illumine a night that is all the more terrifying, filled with all manner of specters that frighten the beholder into insensibility. Death stands like a savior by the side of unfortunate mankind, for without death the madman would be the happiest among creatures. The effort to fathom the giant mechanism is in itself a move towards the abyss, a beginning of madness: for every lure seems an expanding vortex, which soon takes full possession of the unfortunate and carries him away through a night of terrors. Here, they say, is the insidious pitfall of human reason, which nature looks upon as her worst enemy and everywhere seeks to destroy. Praised be the childlike ignorance and innocence of men, which leaves them unaware of the terrible dangers, which everywhere like awesome storm clouds surround their peaceful dwelling places, threatening at every instant to break over them. Only the inner disunity of nature's forces has preserved man up to now, but inexorably the great moment will come when all mankind by common resolve will save itself from this intolerable lot, will wrench itself free from this hideous prison, when through voluntary renunciation of their earthly possessions men will redeem their race forever from this misery, and escape to a happier world, to the home of their ancient father. Thus men would end in a manner worthy of them, thus they would anticipate their inevitable extermination or even more terrible degeneration into beasts through gradual destruction of the mind, through madness. Association with the forces of nature, with beasts, plants, rocks, storms and waves, must inevitably make men resemble these things, and this adaptation, transformation, dissolution of the divine and human into uncontrolled forces is, they say, the spirit of the awful, devouring power that is nature: and

is not indeed everything we see a rape of heaven, a desolation of former glories, the remnant of a hideous feast?

"Very well," say some who are more courageous, "let our race carry on a slow, well-conceived war of annihilation with nature! We must seek to lay her low with insidious poisons. The scientist is a noble hero, who leaps into the open abyss in order to save his fellow citizens. Artists have dealt her many covert blows: continue along this road, possess yourselves of the secret threads, and make her lust after herself. Exploit her strife to bend her to your will, like the fire-spewing bull. She must be made to serve you. Patience and faith befit the children of mankind. Distant brothers are united with us for *one* purpose, the starry wheel will become the spinning wheel of our life, and then with the help of our slaves we shall build ourselves a new Djinnistan. With inward triumph let us behold her devastations, her tumults, she shall sell herself to us, and bitterly atone for every violent deed. With a rapturous sentiment of our freedom let us live and die; here rises the stream that will some day submerge and quell her, let us bathe in it and gather courage for new heroic deeds. The monster's rage cannot reach us, a drop of freedom is enough to lame it forever, and put an end to its devastation."

JEAN-ÉTIENNE-DOMINIQUE ESQUIROL (1772–1840)

from *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* (expanded in Archive)

Jean-Étienne Esquirol is considered the most renowned French psychiatrist of the 19th century. He was born in Toulouse to a destitute but influential family. After traveling to Paris for a career in medicine, Esquirol formed a close bond with Philippe Pinel. Esquirol eventually succeeded his teacher in 1811 as the chief psychiatric administrator at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. In 1825, he was named chief physician of the Charenton Asylum, where he established an international reputation for his work in creating more humane conditions for the mentally ill.

Along with Pinel, Esquirol was offended by the conditions present in European mental institutions—in 1818, after a three-year tour of mental hospitals around France, he wrote a memoir addressed to the minister of the interior in which he presented his findings, describing the plight of the mentally ill and its negative reflection on their custodians. He was a pioneer in advocating humane treatment of the mentally ill; along with his colleague Guillaume Ferrus, Esquirol was a key player in the law reforms of 1838 that led to improved conditions in asylums. Esquirol realized Pinel's vision of a "therapeutic community," in which physicians and patients lived communally in a psychiatric environment. As an example of such ideals, Esquirol's private patients were invited to eat at the same table as his family.

Esquirol also pioneered the method of using explicit clinical observations to accomplish a systematic analysis of mental disturbances. Among his accomplishments are the invention of the term "hallucination" and a more accurate distinction between mental retardation and insanity. His influential work

Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity *(1838) is recognized as the first modern attempt in clinical psychiatry to classify mental disorders; the work elucidates both biological and behavioral causes for mental illness, recognizing that some mental illness may be caused by emotional disturbance rather than organic brain damage. The text remained a standard for 50 years, and Esquirol's writings also strongly influenced the treatment and perception of the mentally ill in England. Esquirol died in Paris in 1840.*

Esquirol was one of the first psychiatrists to organize a statistical report of suicides; for example, he researched the most common methods of suicide, and he compared rates of suicide in neighboring countries. From his clinical experiences, he was inclined to believe that a suicidal nature is involuntary and often hereditary, and therefore should not be morally condemned or punished by law. Esquirol's views anticipate the beginning of the transition—though it would not occur with full force until the time of Freud and Durkheim, nearly a century later—from the conception of suicide as a sin and a crime to the conception of it as the product of psychological and social forces beyond an individual's control. The transition moves to seeing suicide as the product of illness, *not as a voluntary, deliberate act that can be* wrong.

In these selections excerpted from Mental Maladies, *Esquirol takes a clinical perspective on the causes of and motives for suicide. His perceptive observations are coupled with what now seem quaint theories of medicine, but they do represent an important early attempt to interpret suicide as a symptom or sequela of mental illness and to identify predisposing factors for suicide. For Esquirol, suicide is an "effect of disease"; it is to be understood as a symptom of "mental alienation," that is, mental illness. He provides a striking portrait of an insane asylum of the time as he discusses methods for preventing suicides there.*

Source

Jean-Étienne-Dominique Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity*, tr. E. K. Hunt. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845, pp. 253–317.

from MENTAL MALADIES: A TREATISE ON INSANITY

It does not belong to my subject to treat of suicide in its legal relations, nor, consequently, of its criminality. I must limit myself to showing it to be one of the most important subjects of clinical medicine. Self-murder takes place under circumstances so opposite, and is determined by motives so diverse, that it cannot be limited to any single denomination. However varied may be the motives and circumstances, which cause men to expose their lives, and to brave death, they almost always exalt the imagination, either on account of a good, more precious than life, or an evil more formidable than death.

. . . All the passions have their seasons of fury. In their excesses, there is nothing that they do not sacrifice; and man, while a prey to a passion, spares not his own life. . . .

[S]uicide is . . . only a phenomenon, consecutive to a great number of diverse causes; that it presents itself under very different characters; and that this phenomenon is not exclusively confined to any one malady. . . . It is in consequence of having made suicide a malady *sui generis*, that they have established general propositions, which experience disproves. . . .

Suicide Provoked by the Passions

A few words will satisfy the most incredulous, that the passions, when strongly excited, ever produce disturbance, either in the organism or understanding of man. When the soul is strongly moved, by a violent and unexpected affection, organic functions are perverted, the reason is disturbed, the individual loses his self-consciousness, is in a true delirium, and commits acts the most thoughtless; those most opposed to his instinct, to his affections and interests. Thus, terror often takes away the thought of flight, and urges its victim into perils, greater than the danger he would shun. . . . A sudden and unexpected trial, love betrayed, ambition disappointed, honor compromised, the loss of fortune, by overthrowing the reason, deprive man of the power of reflection. Does the delirium of the passions permit man to reflect? Do not all laws acquit him who has committed, during the first transports of a violent passion, an act, which would have been criminal had it not been for this circumstance? The actions of a man, transported by a sudden passion, are regarded as performed without free agency; and are judged of, as the effect of a temporary delirium. Strong men, of a sanguine temperament, of great susceptibility, and of an irascible disposition, are impelled to suicide by an impulse so much the more strong, as the impression has been unexpected; and the passion a social one, suddenly called into exercise. But the acute delirium provoked by the passions, is temporary, and the suicide which it provokes is promptly executed. If not consummated, the impulse is not, ordinarily, renewed. The fruitless attempt seems to have been the crisis of the moral affection. The involuntary and acute form of suicide is very different from that which is chronic, and the result of premeditation. . . .

But the most violent passions do not always impel the passionate man suddenly to the commission of acts of fury. . . . The secret prey of hatred and jealousy and of miscalculations with respect to schemes of ambition and fortune, man arrives slowly, and by successive paroxysms, to the most fatal resolutions. Although acting slowly, the passions do not less enfeeble the organs, nor less disturb the reason. . . . Many have made attempts upon their lives, without knowing what they were doing; and many have assured me, that they recollected nothing that they had done. Many also, had singular hallucinations. This, though voluntary suicide, is chronic. It is to this variety, that we are to refer that form of suicide which is resolved upon through hatred or weariness of life; which last, appears to me to offer important considerations. Chronic suicide has, more particularly, given rise to discussions respecting the criminality of self-murder, because it presents the characteristics of a premeditated act. . . . Physical suffering, which often leads to lypemania and hypochondria, also causes suicide. It changes the sensations, concentrates the attention, impairs the courage, and destroys the reason, by modifying the sensibility so as to accord with the prevailing passions. . . .

. . . Every case of monomania may lead to self-murder; whether the monomaniac obey his illusions or hallucinations, or fall a victim to a delirious passion. A monomaniac hears an *internal voice*, which is constantly repeating; *slay thyself, slay thyself*; and he takes his life, in obedience to a superior power, whose mandate he cannot disobey. . . .

Nostalgia leads to suicide. . . . The emotions thus awakened, together with their despair at being separated from those objects which call them into exercise, rise superior to all other feelings. . . .

Weariness of life, has not been sufficiently distinguished from hatred of it, when writers have enquired into the determining motives to self-murder. Not-withstanding, these two

conditions of the mind are very different. Hatred of life is an active state, and supposes a sort of irritation and exaltation of the sensibility. Weariness of life is a passive state, the effect of *atony* of the sensibility. Hatred of life is frequent, because a thousand circumstances provoke it. It spares no class of society, and most frequently attacks men abounding in wealth and dignity, because they possess more passions, which are called into active exercise. A prey to vexations, either real or imaginary, or to a chronic passion, man, at first disgusted with life, ends by hating it, and destroying himself. . . .

Weariness of life, the *tædium vitæ*, leads to self-murder. Although weariness may be a passive condition, it is, in some instances, not the less a motive of action. Such has been the opinion of many philosophers, and I have observed, that weariness determined certain monomaniacs to do what had appeared most repugnant to them, and that they were cured by efforts made upon themselves, from excessive ennui. Ennui, at the epoch of puberty, originates in a vague desire, the object of which is unknown to him who experiences it; and this want gives rise to an inquietude, which occasions sadness, terminating in weariness. . . . Ennui recognizes moreover as a cause, the cessation of engrossing occupations; the transition from a very active life to one of repose and idleness, when no occupation for the mind or affections of the heart have been previously formed. . . .

Man must have desires, or he falls into a state of painful weariness. But if he has exhausted his sensibility by the excessive exercise of the emotions and the abuse of pleasures; if, having exhausted all the sources of happiness, there is nothing more that can cause him to feel that he still lives, and all external objects are indifferent to him; if, the more means of self-satisfaction he has enjoyed, the less numerous are the new objects which he meets with that are calculated to awaken his interest; man then occupies a frightful void. He sinks into a state of satiety; a terrible weariness, which conducts to suicide. . . .

There are persons who, amidst fortune, grandeur and pleasures, and enjoying the perfect use of their reason; after having embraced their relations and friends, set their affairs in order, and written excellent letters, clip the thread of life. Do they yield to a delirious resolution? Yes, unquestionably. Is it not true that monomaniacs appear rational, until an external or internal impression comes in suddenly to awaken their delirium? Do they not know how to repress the expression of their delirium, and to dissemble the disorder of their understanding, so as to deceive the most skilful, as well as persons who live with them on terms of intimacy? The same is true of some individuals, over whom the purpose to commit suicide holds complete sway. A physical pain, an unexpected impression, a moral affection, a recollection, an indiscreet proposal, the perusal of a book, kindle up anew the dominant thought, and instantaneously provoke determinations the most fatal, in the breast of an unfortunate being who, an instant previous, was perfectly composed. . . .

. . . There are suicides as well as other insane persons, of whom we speak, as of unfortunate beings, who are obeying a blind destiny. I believe that many persons have learned to read the thoughts of these patients, and proved that their determinations are, almost always, the result of motives and the logical consequence of a principle, though it may be, in truth, a false one. There are persons, however, who, in the midst of good fortune, destroy themselves. Voltaire, sustained by certain striking examples, pretends that it is those who are distinguished for their good fortune who voluntarily terminate their existence, and not the man who is the victim of want, and compelled to labor for his subsistence. This proposition is false. Misery leads to suicide, and self-murder is most frequent during years signalized by calamities. Amidst ruin and famine, suicides are frequent. During the horrors of a siege, the besieged destroy themselves.

Amidst defeats, soldiers take their own lives. Self-murder takes place during great political convulsions. . . .

. . . There are those who are unwilling to destroy themselves, through fear of eternal condemnation; knowing that suicide is a great crime, for which they could not obtain pardon. They are however, certain of being condemned to death after taking the life of a fellow-being, and hope to have time, before their punishment, to reconcile themselves to God, and to prepare for a happy death. There are those who slay the dearest objects of their affection, in order to preserve them from the trials of life and the dangers of condemnation. Finally, we have seen those who slew the objects of their tenderest attachment, being unwilling to be separated from them, and believing that they should be reunited after death. Is it possible to believe that such a violation of the fundamental laws of nature; such exaltation of the imagination; such perversion of the sensibility; can be compatible with the enjoyment of sound health and the integrity of reason? Must he not, on the contrary, have reached the extreme limit of delirium, who resolves to take the life of the wife whom he tenderly loves, and the children whom he adores? Does he not abandon himself at once, to acts most opposed to natural laws, and the instinct of self-preservation? Notwithstanding, many facts prove that these unfortunate beings, aside from this act, both before and after its accomplishment, are composed and rational. . . .

. . . All that I have said hitherto, together with the facts which I have related, prove that suicide offers all the characteristics of mental alienation, of which it is, in reality, a symptom: that we must not look for a single and peculiar sign of suicide, since we observe it under circumstances the most opposite, and since it is symptomatic or secondary, either in acute or febrile delirium, or in chronic delirium. . . . Suicide is sometimes cured spontaneously, like mental diseases; through the influence of hygienic agents, by some physical or moral crisis; or by the aid of medicines. . . .

. . . Suicides, like all lypemaniacs, think too much. We must either prevent them from thinking, or oblige them to think differently from what they are in the habit of doing. Reasoning effects little; moral commotions are of more service. Celsus advises that individuals who entertain a desire for suicide, should go abroad; and physicians, in all times, have recommended corporeal exercises, gymnastics, riding on horseback, the cultivation of the soil, journeying, etc. . . .

. . . [I]s suicide a criminal act which may be punished by the laws? Has the legislator the means of preventing it? Since suicide is almost always the effect of disease, it cannot be punished; the law inflicting penalties, only upon acts voluntarily committed, in the full enjoyment of reason. Now I believe that I have shown, that man only makes attempts upon his life, when in a state of delirium, and that suicides are insane persons. . . . But, in view of the interest of humanity and society, can the legislator have recourse to means adapted to prevent an act, which outrages equally, natural laws, the laws of religion and of society. . . .

The laws of Christian countries, which condemn all murder, have pronounced self-murder to be the greatest crime, because it leaves no room for repentance. They refuse to the dead bodies of suicides, a Christian burial. All modern legislation, to which the laws of the church have served as a basis, have branded suicide with infamy. . . . If it be affirmed in opposition, says this writer, that the disgrace and penalties attending this act, and the fear of infamy, will prevent the most resolute man from the commission of it; I reply that he whom the horror of death, and the threats of eternal punishment do not restrain, will not be deterred, by considerations far less weighty.

RAMMOHUN ROY (1774–1833)

from *Translation of a Conference Between an Advocate For, and an Opponent Of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive*

Raja Rammohun Roy (also spelled Ram Mohun) was born in Bengal in an ancient Brahman family in 1774, or, according to some sources, 1772. Roy was a religious and social reformer during the British colonial period and founder of the Brahmo Samaj, a theist Hindu revivalist movement with strong social-reform commitments. Well-educated, Roy studied Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, and later Hebrew and Greek; he was influenced by the monotheistic teachings of Islam, and at about age 15 or 16 went to Tibet to study Buddhism, causing considerable controversy with his opposition to lama-worship. He was also influenced by Western society's traditions and his study of the Christian gospels. He served for a decade with the East India Company, eventually as Diwan, *or head of revenue collections.*

Roy was a reformer in many areas, including education, the caste system, freedom of the press, the abolishment of polygamy and child marriage, and the issue of women's right to inheritance. He considered certain aspects of Hindu culture to be counterproductive in terms of India's political interests, and directed his reform movement toward changing these aspects in the name of preserving the whole of Hindu culture.

In 1811, Roy is reported to have been a "horrified witness" of the act of sati *or self-immolation when his elder brother Jagomohan died and one of his widowed wives was burnt alive with him; Rammohun "vowed never to rest until he had uprooted this custom." His "Translation of a Conference Between an Advocate For, and an Opponent Of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive" (1818) is one of several tracts dedicated to examining the alleged religious obligation of* sati *or concremation. Roy was given the title Raja by the emperor of Delhi and appointed his special envoy to convey the case concerning* sati *to the Privy Council in England. Roy lived to see the 1829 abolition of* sati *formally upheld by the Privy Council in 1832, but died unexpectedly the following year at Bristol, his death attributed to brain fever.*

Sources

Ram Mohun Roy, "Translation of a Conference Between an Advocate For, and an Opponent Of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive," from the original Bungla (Calcutta 1818), in *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Bahadhurganj, Allahabad, 1906. Reprint, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1978, pp. 323–332. Material in the introduction from the biographical sketch of the author, pp. ix-xi, and from Benoy Bhusan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987).

from TRANSLATION OF A CONFERENCE BETWEEN AN ADVOCATE FOR, AND AN OPPONENT OF, THE PRACTICE OF BURNING WIDOWS ALIVE

Advocate. I am surprised that you endeavour to oppose the practice of Concremation and Postcremation of widows,[1] as long observed in this country.

Opponent. Those who have no reliance on the Sastra, and those who take delight in the self-destruction of women, may well wonder that we should oppose that suicide which is forbidden by all the Sastras, and by every race of men.

Advocate. You have made an improper assertion in alleging that Concremation and Postcremation are forbidden by the Sastras. Hear what Angira and the other saints have said on this subject:

"That Woman who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Arundhati.

"She who follows her husband to another world, shall dwell in a region of joy for so many years as there are hairs in the human body, or thirty-five millions.

"As a serpent-catcher forcibly draws a snake from his hole, thus raising her husband by her power, she enjoys delight along with him.

"The woman who follows her husband expiates the sins of the three races; her father's line, her mother's line, and the family of him to whom she was given a virgin.

"There possessing her husband as her chiefest good, herself the best of women, enjoying the highest delights, she partakes of bliss with her husband as long as fourteen Indras reign.

"Even though the man had slain a Brahman, or returned evil for good, or killed an intimate friend, the woman expiates those crimes.

"There is no other way known for a virtuous woman except ascending the pile of her husband. It should be understood that there is no other duty whatever after the death of her husband."

Hear also what Vyasa has written in the parable of the pigeon:

"A pigeon, devoted to her husband, after his death entered the flames, and ascending to heaven, she there found her husband."

And hear Harita's words:

"As long as a woman shall not burn herself after her husband's death she shall be subject to a transmigration in a female form."

Hear too what Vishnu, the saint, says:

"After the death of her husband a wife must live an ascetic, or ascend his pile."

Now hear the words of the Brahma Purana on the subject of Postcremation:

"If her lord die in another country, let the faithful wife place his sandals on her breast, and pure enter the fire."

The faithful widow is declared no suicide by this text of the Rig Veda: "When three days of impurity are gone she obtained obsequies."

[1] When a widow is absent from her husband at the time of his death, she may in certain cases burn herself along with some relic representing the deceased. This practice is called Anumaran or Postcremation.

Gotama says:

"To a Brahmani after the death of her husband, Postcremation is not permitted. But to women of the other classes it is esteemed a chief duty."

"Living let her benefit her husband; dying she commits suicide."

"The woman of the Brahman tribe that follows her dead husband, cannot, on account of her self-destruction, convey either herself or her husband to heaven."

Concremation and Postcremation being thus established by the words of many sacred lawgivers, how can you say they are forbidden by the Sastras, and desire to prevent their practice?

Opponent. All those passages you have quoted are indeed sacred law; and it is clear from those authorities, that if women perform Concremation or Postcremation, they will enjoy heaven for a considerable time. But attend to what Manu and others say respecting the duty of widows: "Let her emaciate her body, by living voluntarily on pure flowers, roots, and fruits, but let her not, when her lord is deceased, even pronounce the name of another man. Let her continue till death forgiving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure, and cheerfully practising the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to one only husband."

Here Manu directs, that after the death of her husband, the widow should pass her whole life as an ascetic. Therefore, the laws given by Angira and others whom you have quoted, being contrary to the law of Manu, cannot be accepted; because the Veda declares, "Whatever Manu has said is wholesome;" and Vrihaspati, "Whatever law is contrary to the law of Manu is not commendable." The Veda especially declares, "By living in the practice of regular and occasional duties the mind may be purified. Thereafter by hearing, reflecting, and constantly meditating on the Supreme Being, absorption in Brahma may be attained. Therefore from a desire during life of future fruition, life ought not to be destroyed." Manu, Yajnavalkya, and others, have then, in their respective codes of laws prescribed to widows, the duties of ascetics only. By this passage of the Veda, therefore, and the authority of Manu and others, the words you have quoted from Angira and the rest are set aside; for by the express declaration of the former, widows after the death of their husbands, may, by living as ascetics, obtain absorption.

Advocate. What you have said respecting the laws of Angira and others, that recommended the practice of Concremation and Postcremation we do not admit: because, though a practice has not been recommended by Manu, yet, if directed by other lawgivers, it should not on that account be considered as contrary to the law of Manu. For instance, Manu directs the performance of Sandhya, but says calling on the name of Hari. The words of Vyasa do not contradict those of Manu. The same should be understood in the present instance. Manu has commended widows to live as ascetics; Vishnu and other saints direct that they should either live as ascetics or follow their husbands. Therefore the law of Manu may be considered to be applicable as an alternative.

Opponent. The analogy you have drawn betwixt the practice of Sandhya and invoking Hari, and that of Concremation and Postcremation does not hold. For, in the course of the day the performance of Sandhya, at the prescribed time, does not prevent one from invoking Hari at another period; and, on the other hand, the invocation of Hari need not interfere with the performance of Sandhya. In this case, the direction of one practice is not inconsistent with that of the other. But in the case of living as an ascetic or undergoing Concremation, the performance of the one is incompatible with the observance of the other. *Scil.* [To wit,] Spending one's whole life as an ascetic after the death of a husband, is incompatible with immediate Concremation as directed by Angira and others; and *vice versa*, Concremation, as directed by Angira and others, is inconsistent with living as an ascetic, in order to attain

absorption. Therefore those two authorities are obviously contradictory of each other. More especially as Angira, by declaring that "there is no other way known for a virtuous woman except ascending the pile of her husband," has made Concremation an indispensible duty. And Harita also, in his code, by denouncing evil consequences, in his declaration, that "as long as a woman shall not burn herself after the death of her husband, she shall be subject to transmigration in a female form," has made this duty absolute. Therefore all those passages are in every respect contradictory to the law of Manu and others.

Advocate. When Angira says that there is no other way for a widow except Concremation, and when Harita says that the omission of it is a fault, we reconcile their words with those of Manu, by considering them as used merely for the purpose of exalting the merit of Concremation, but not as prescribing this as an indispensable duty. All these expressions, moreover, convey a promise of regard for Concremation, and thence it appears that Concremation is only optional.

Opponent. If, in order to reconcile them with the text of Manu, you set down the words of Angira and Harita, that make the duty incumbent, as meant only to convey an exaggerated praise of Concremation, why do you not also reconcile the rest of the words of Angira, Harita, and others, with those in which Manu prescribes to the widow the practice of living as an ascetic as her absolute duty? And why do you not keep aloof from witnessing the destruction of females, instead of tempting them with the inducement of future fruition? Moreover, in the text already quoted, self-destruction with the view of reward is expressly prohibited.

Advocate. What you have quoted from Manu and Yajnavalkya and the text of the Veda is admitted. But how can you set aside the following text of the Rig Veda on the subject of Concremation?"O fire! let these women, with bodies anointed with clarified butter, eyes coloured with collyrium, and void of tears, enter thee, the parent of water, that they may not be separated from their husbands, but may be, in unison with excellent husbands, themselves sinless and jewels amongst women."

Opponent. This text of the Veda, and the former passages from Harita and the rest whom you have quoted, all praise the practice of Concremation as leading to fruition, and are addressed to those who are occupied by sensual desires; and you cannot but admit that to follow these practices is only optional. In repeating the Sankalpa of Concremation, the desire of future fruition is declared as the object. The text therefore of the Veda which we have quoted, offering no gratifications, supercedes, in every respect, that which you have adduced, as well as all the words of Angira and the rest. In proof we quote from the Kathopanishad: "Faith in God which leads to absorption is one thing and rites which have future fruition for their object, another. Each of these, producing different consequences, hold out to man inducements to follow it. The man, who of these two chooses faith, is blessed: and he, who for the sake of reward practices rites, is dashed away from the enjoyment of eternal beatitude." Also the Mundakopanishad: "Rites, of which there are eighteen members, are all perishable: he who considers them as the source of blessing shall undergo repeated transmigrations; and all those fools who, immersed in the foolish practice of rites, consider themselves to be wise and learned, are repeatedly subjected to birth, disease, death, and other pains. When one blind man is guided by another, both subject themselves on their way to all kinds of distress."

It is asserted in the Bhagavad Gita, the essence of all the Smirtis, Puranas, and Itihasas, that, "all those ignorant persons who attach themselves to the words of the Vedas that convey promises of fruition, consider those falsely alluring passages as leading to real happiness, and say, that besides them there is no other reality. Agitated in their minds by these desires, they believe

the abodes of the celestial gods to be the chief object; and they devote themselves to those texts which treat of ceremonies and their fruits, and entice by promises of enjoyment. Such people can have no real confidence in the Supreme Being." Thus also do the Mundakopanishad and the Gita state that, "the science by which a knowledge of God is attained is superior to all other knowledge." Therefore it is clear, from those passages of the Veda and of the Gita, that the words of the Veda which promise fruition, are set aside by the texts of contrary import. Moreover, the ancient saints and holy teachers, and their commentators, and yourselves, as well as we and others, agree that Manu is better acquainted than any other lawgiver with the spirit of the Veda. And he, understanding the meaning of those different texts, admitting the inferiority of that which promised fruition, and following that which conveyed no promise of gratifications, has directed widows to spend their lives as ascetics. He has also defined in his 12th chapter, what acts are observed merely for the sake of gratifications, and what are not. "Whatever act is performed for the sake of gratifications in this world or the next is called Prabartak, and those which are performed according to the knowledge respecting God, are called Nibartak. All those who perform acts to procure gratifications, may enjoy heaven like the gods; and he who performs acts free from desires, procures release from the five elements of this body, that is, obtains absorption."

Advocate. What you have said is indeed consistent with the Vedas, with Manu, and with the Bhagavad Gita. But from this I fear, that the passages of the Vedas and the other Sastras, that prescribe Concremation and Postcremation as the means of attaining heavenly enjoyments, must be considered as only meant to deceive.

Opponent. There is no deception. The object of those passages is declared. As men have various dispositions, those whose minds are enveloped in desire, passion and cupidity, have no inclination for the disinterested worship of the Supreme Being. If they had no Sastras of rewards, they would at once throw aside all Sastras, and would follow their several inclinations, like elephants unguided by the hook. In order to restrain such persons from being led only by their inclinations, the Sastra prescribes various ceremonies, as Syenayaga for one desirous of the destruction of the enemy, Putreshti for one desiring a son, and Jyotishtoma for one desiring gratifications in heaven, &c.; but again reprobates such as are actuated by those desires, and at the same moment expresses contempt for such gratifications. Had the Sastra not repeatedly reprobated both those actuated by desire and the fruits desired by them, all those texts might be considered as deceitful. In proof of what I have advanced I cite the following text of the Upanishad, "Knowledge and rites together offer themselves to every man. The wise man considers which of these two is better and which the worse. By reflecting, he becomes convinced of the superiority of the former, despises rites, and takes refuge in knowledge. And the unlearned, for the sake of bodily gratifications, has recourse to the performance of the rites." The Bhagavad Gita says: "The Vedas treat of rites are for the sake of those who are possessed of desire: therefore, O Arjuna! do thou abstain from desires."

Hear also the text of the Veda reprobating the fruits of rites: "As in this world the fruits obtained from cultivation and labour perish, so in the next world fruits derived from rites are perishable." Also the Bhagavad Gita: "Also those who observe the rites prescribed by the three Vedas, and through those ceremonies worship me and seek for heaven, having become sinless from eating the remains of offerings, ascending to heaven, and enjoying the pleasures of the gods, after the completion of their rewards, again return to earth. Therefore, the observers of rites for the sake of rewards, repeatedly, ascend to heaven, and return to the world, and cannot obtain absorption."

Advocate. Though what you have advanced from the Veda and sacred codes against the practice of Concremation and Postcremation, is not to be set aside, yet we have had the practice prescribed by Harita and others handed down to us.

Opponent. Such an argument is highly inconsistent with justice. It is every way improper to persuade to self-destruction by citing passages of inadmissible authority. In the second place, it is evident from your own authorities, and the Sankalpa recited in conformity with them, that the widow should voluntarily quit life, ascending the flaming pile of her husband. But, on the contrary, you first bind down the widow along with the corpse of her husband, and heap over her such a quantity of wood that she cannot rise. At the time too of setting fire to the pile, you press her down with large bamboos. In what passage of Harita or the rest do you find authority for thus binding the woman according to your practice? This then is, in fact, deliberate female murder.

Advocate. Though Harita and the rest do not indeed authorize this practice of binding, &c., yet where a woman after having recited the Sankalpa not to perform Concremation, it would be sinful, and considered disgraceful by others. It is on this account that we have adopted this custom.

Opponent. Respecting the sinfulness of such an act, that is mere talk: for in the same codes it is laid down, that the performance of a penance will obliterate the sin of quitting the pile. Or in case of inability to undergo the regular penance, absolution may be obtained by bestowing the value of a cow, or three kahans of cowries. Therefore the sin is no cause of alarm. The disgrace in the opinion of others is also nothing: for good men regard not the blame or reproach of persons who can reprobate those who abstain from the sinful murder of women. And do you not consider how great is the sin to kill a woman; therein forsaking the fear of God, the fear of conscience, and the fear of the Sastras, merely from a dread of the reproach of those who delight in female murder?

Advocate. Though tying down in this manner be not authorized by the Sastras, yet we practise it as being a custom that has been observed throughout Hindustan.

Opponent. It never was the case that the practice of fastening down widows on the pile was prevalent throughout Hindustan: for it is but of late years that this mode has been followed, and that only in Bengal, which is but a small part of Hindustan. No one besides who has the fear of God and man before him, will assert that male or female murder, theft, &c., having been long practised, cease to be vices. If, according to your argument, custom ought to set aside the precepts of the Sastras, the inhabitants of the forests and mountains who have been in the habits of plunder, must be considered as guiltless of sin, and it would be improper to endeavour to restrain their habits. The Sastras, and the reasonings connected with them, enable us to discriminate right from wrong. In those Sastras such female murder is altogether forbidden. And reason also declares, that to bind down a woman for her destruction, holding out to her the inducement of heavenly rewards, is a most sinful act.

Advocate. This practice may be sinful or anything else, but we will not refrain from observing it. Should it cease, people would general apprehend that if women did not perform Concremation on the death of their husbands, they might go astray; but if they burn themselves this fear is done away. Their family and relations are freed from apprehension. And if the husband could be assured during his life that his wife would follow him on the pile, his mind would be at ease from apprehensions of her misconduct.

Opponent. What can be done, if, merely to avoid the possible danger of disgrace, you are unmercifully resolved to commit the sin of female murder. But is there not also a danger of a woman's going astray during the life-time of her husband, particularly when he resides for a long time in a distant country? What remedy then have you got against this cause of alarm?

Advocate. There is a great difference betwixt the case of the husband's being alive, and of his death; for while a husband is alive, whether he resides near or at a distance, a wife is under his control; she must stand in awe of him. But after his death that authority ceases, and she of course is divested of fear.

Opponent. The Sastras which command that a wife should live under the control of her husband during his life, direct that on his death she shall live under the authority of her husband's family, or else under that of her parental relations; and the Sastras have authorized the ruler of the country to maintain the observance of this law. Therefore, the possibility of a woman's going astray cannot be more guarded against during the husband's life than it is after his death. For you daily see, that even while the husband is alive, he gives up his authority, and the wife separates from him. Control alone cannot restrain from evil thoughts, words, and actions; but the suggestions of wisdom and the fear of God may cause both man and woman to abstain from sin. Both the Sastras and experience show this.

Advocate. You have repeatedly asserted, that from want of feeling we promote female destruction. This is incorrect, for it is declared in our Veda and codes of law, that mercy is the root of virtue, and from our practice of hospitality, &c., our compassionate dispositions are well known.

Opponent. That in other cases you shew charitable dispositions is acknowledged. But by witnessing from your youth the voluntary burning of women amongst your elder relatives, your neighbors and the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, and by observing the indifference manifested at the time when the women are writhing under the torture of the flames, habits of insensibility are produced. For the same reason, when men or women are suffering the pains of death, you feel for them no sense of compassion, like the worshippers of the female deities who, witnessing from their infancy the slaughter of kids and buffaloes, feel no compassion for them in the time of their suffering death, while the followers of Vishnu are touched with strong feelings of pity.

Advocate. What you have said I shall carefully consider.

Opponent. It is to me a source of great satisfaction, that you are now ready to take this matter into your consideration. By forsaking prejudice and reflecting on the Sastra, what is really conformable to its precepts may be perceived, and the evils and disgrace brought on this country by the crime of female murder will cease.

THOMAS DE QUINCEY (1785–1859)

from *Essays in Philosophy: On Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

The English essayist and critic, Thomas De Quincey, was one of the foremost figures in English Romanticism. De Quincey was born in Manchester of a mercantile family; at 17, he ran away from school and wandered through Wales and led an impoverished bohemian life in London. While at Oxford, he introduced himself to Coleridge and Wordsworth in 1807, having been an early admirer

of their Lyrical Ballads. *In an attempt to escape his creditors, in 1828, De Quincey moved with his family to Edinburgh, then a focus of literary activity. There the family was compelled to move into the Holyrood debtors' sanctuary. The father of eight children, it was only in the last decade of his life that he achieved some financial success. His literary output was immense, including many brilliant but often digressive magazine articles. His most famous critical work was "On Knocking at the Gate in* Macbeth," *a classic of Shakespearean criticism. Although he wrote on a number of different subjects—history, economics, psychology, and others—he is best known for the* Confessions of an English Opium-Eater *(1821), an autobiographical account of his early life and opium addiction. His addiction was so severe that he left his wife to struggle almost alone with their debts and the responsibility for the children, while De Quincey himself lay in bed, tortured by nightmares. De Quincey continued to take opium for the rest of his life. The declared purpose of the work is to warn the reader of the dangers of opium, but it simultaneously describes the pleasures of addiction.*

In this section from Essays in Philosophy *entitled "On Suicide" (1823), De Quincey, disputing issues discussed by John Donne [q.v.] in* Biathanatos *and also by Kant [q.v.], argues that there are some cases in which self-destruction is justified. Such cases include the woman who chooses to die rather than be dishonored and the man who dies rather than suffer human nature in his person to be degraded by corporal punishment or by being forced to perform the labor of animals. As a sufferer of "suicidal despondency," De Quincey argues that suicide motivated by personal self-interest is unjustified, but suicide that seeks to protect paramount interests of human nature is permissible.*

Source

Thomas De Quincey, "On Suicide," in *Essays in Philosophy*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1856, pp. 209–213. Quotation from De Quincey, *Works*, 2. 66.

from ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY

ON SUICIDE

It is a remarkable proof of the inaccuracy with which most men read—that Donne's *Biathanatos* has been supposed to countenance Suicide; and those who reverence his name have thought themselves obliged to apologize for it by urging, that it was written before he entered the church. But Donne's purpose in this treatise was a pious one: many authors had charged the martyrs of the Christian church with Suicide—on the principle that if I put myself in the way of a mad bull, knowing that he will kill me—I am as much chargeable with an act of self-destruction as if I fling myself into a river. Several casuists had extended this principle even to the case of Jesus Christ: one instance of which, in a modern author, the reader may see noticed and condemned by Kant, in his *Religion innerhalb die grenzen der blossen Vernunft*; and another of much earlier date (as far back as the 13th century, I think), in a commoner book—Voltaire's notes on the little treatise of Beccaria, *Dei delitte e delle pene.* Those statements tended to one of two results: either they unsanctified the characters of those who founded and nursed the Christian church; or they sanctified suicide. By the way of meeting them, Donne wrote his book: and as the whole

argument of his opponents turned upon a false definition of suicide (not explicitly stated, but assumed), he endeavored to reconstitute the notion of what is essential to create an act of suicide. Simply to kill a man is not murder: *prima facie*, therefore, there is some sort of presumption that simply for a man to kill himself—may not always be so: there is such a thing as simple homicide distinct from murder: there may therefore, possibly be such a thing as self-homicide distinct from self-murder. There *may* be a ground for such a distinction, *ex analogia*. But, secondly, on examination, *is* there any ground for such a distinction? Donne affirms that there is; and, reviewing several eminent cases of spontaneous martyrdom, he endeavors to show that acts so motived and so circumstantiated will not come within the notion of suicide properly defined. Meantime, may not this tend to the encouragement of suicide in general, and without discrimination of its species? No: Donne's arguments have no prospective reference or application; they are purely retrospective. The circumstances necessary to create an act of mere self-homicide can rarely concur, except in state of disordered society, and during the *cardinal* revolutions of human history: where, however, they *do* concur, there it will not be suicide. In fact, this is the natural and practical judgment of us all. We do not agree on the particular cases which will justify self-destruction: but we all feel and involuntarily acknowledge (*implicitly* acknowledge in our admiration, though not explicitly in our words or in our principles), that there *are* such cases. There is no man, who in his heart would not reverence a woman that chose to die rather than to be dishonored: and If we do not say, that it is her duty to do so, *that* is because the moralist must condescend to the weakness and infirmities of human nature: mean and ignoble natures must not be taxed up to the level of noble ones. Again, with regard to the other sex, corporal punishment is its peculiar and *sexual* degradation; and if ever the distinction of Donne can be applied safely to any case, it will be to the case of him who chooses to die rather than to submit to that ignominy. *At present*, however, there is but a dim and very confined sense, even amongst enlightened men (as we may see by the debates of Parliament), of the injury which is done to human nature by giving legal sanction to such brutalizing acts; and therefore most men, in seeking to escape it, would be merely shrinking from a *personal* dishonor. Corporal punishment is usually argued with a single reference to the case of him who suffers it; and *so* argued, God knows that it is worthy of all abhorrence: but the weightiest argument against it—is the foul indignity which is offered to our common nature lodged in the person of him on whom it is inflicted. *His* nature is *our* nature: and, supposing it possible that *he* were so far degraded as to be unsusceptible of any influences but those which address him through the brutal part of his nature, yet for the sake of ourselves—No! not merely for ourselves, or for the human race now existing, but for the sake of human nature, which transcends all existing participators of that nature—we should remember that the evil of corporal punishment is not to be measured by the poor transitory criminal, whose memory and offence are soon to perish: these, in the sum of things, are as nothing: the injury which can be done him, and the injury which he can do, have so momentary an existence that they may be safely neglected: but the abiding injury is to the most august interest which for the mind of man can have any existence,—viz. to his own nature: to raise and dignify which, I am persuaded, is the first—last—and holiest command which the conscience imposes on the philosophic moralist. In countries, where the traveller has the pain of seeing human creatures performing the labors of brutes, surely the sorrow which the spectacle moves, if a wise sorrow, will not be chiefly directed to the poor degraded individual—too deeply degraded probably, to be sensible of his own degradation, but to the reflection that man's nature is thus exhibited in a state of miserable abasement; and, what is worst of all, abasement proceeding from man himself. Now, whenever this view of

corporal punishment becomes general (as inevitably it will, under the influence of advancing civilization), I say, that Donne's principle will then become applicable to this case, and it will be the duty of a man to die rather than to suffer his own nature to be dishonored in that way. But so long as a man is not fully sensible of the dishonor, to him the dishonor, except as a personal one, does not wholly exist. In general, whenever a paramount interest of human nature is at stake, a suicide which maintains that interest is self-homicide: but, for a personal interest, it becomes self-murder. And into this principle Donne's may be resolved.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER (1788–1860)

from *The World as Will and Idea*

from *Studies in Pessimism: On Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Born in Danzig of a wealthy merchant and a mother who was to become a famous romantic novelist, the young Schopenhauer studied modern languages in order to prepare for the mercantile career that his father desired for him. The family travelled through Europe extensively, and Schopenhauer lived in France and England. When his father died in 1805, a presumed suicide by drowning, the family moved to Weimar where his mother hosted literary celebrities, including the writers Goethe [q.v.] and Wieland. When he was 21, Schopenhauer entered the University of Göttingen as a medical student, but quickly switched to philosophy. His studies were first concentrated on Plato [q.v.] and Kant [q.v.], both of whom, along with the Hindu Upanishads [q.v., under Vedas, Puranas, and Upanishads] and other Eastern mystical thinkers, served as important foundations for his thinking.

In his major philosophical work, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung *(1818; published in English as* The World as Will and Idea*, 1883–86), Schopenhauer posits a pessimistic idealism in which everything is a mental construction of the subjective mind. One can come to understand, through reflection, perception, and reasoning, how the world works; however, the true nature of reality remains hidden. The will exists in all things and is only conscious in man, yet the will is not completely free from predetermined, irrational, and unconscious motives. The will leads to individuation, but also to turmoil and trials: the amount of happiness is therefore always less than the amount of unhappiness. Relief and pleasure can be found in beauty, but only temporarily; only denial of the demands of the will, in the manner of the saints, can ultimately lead to internal peace. Schopenhauer's publication was initially ignored, and his attempt to establish himself as a professor at the University of Berlin failed, in part because he chose to lecture at the same time as the immensely popular Hegel. Schopenhauer was severe, distrustful, suspicious, and profoundly misogynist; and his life was lonely, violent, and unbefriended, except for his poodle "Atma," a name borrowed from Hinduism/Buddhism, reinterpreted in Schopenhauer's thought as the "universal soul," "the impersonal, eternally renewed primordial force of nature." It was only in the last decade of his life, after the publication of* Parerga and

Paralipomena *(1851), a collection of aphorisms and essays, that he achieved fame and an admiring public. Schopenhauer died of heart failure in 1860.*

The following selections from The World as Will and Idea *and* Studies in Pessimism *from* Parerga and Paralipomena *outline Schopenhauer's conception of suicide. He completely rejects the view of suicide as sin and as crime that, he says, is characteristic of the monotheistic religions; in his view, suicide is not* wrong. *However, although Schopenhauer advocates denial of the will, he rejects most suicide as a means to achieve it. This condemnation is not moral or legal; rather it is a cognitive mistake, at least when suicide is the result of personal despair. In some situations, however, such as voluntary self-starvation or religious sacrifice, suicide may be the assertion of an asceticism lacking a will; the difference between the suicide of the genuine ascetic and suicide resulting from despair is that the ascetic denies life's pleasures and wills nothing, while the suicide of despair rejects life's sorrows and desires a better world. The ascetic realizes that life is a state of suffering, while the suicide of despair erroneously believes that his own life embodies the problem.*

Sources

Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea*; Vol. 1, Book IV, "The Assertion and Denial of the Will," Sec. 69. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1883, pp. 514–520, excerpted; "On Suicide," in *Studies in Pessimism: A Series of Essays*, tr. T. Bailey Saunders. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1893, pp. 43–50, footnotes deleted or interpolated; also available online from Project Gutenberg Release #10732 at www.gutenberg.org; quote in biographical note from Bhikkhu Nanajivako, "Schopenhauer and Buddhism," Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1970, 1988, p. 7.

from THE WORLD AS WILL AND IDEA

§69. Suicide, the actual doing away with the individual manifestation of will, differs most widely from the denial of the will to live, which is the single outstanding act of free-will in the manifestation, and is therefore, as Asmus calls it, the transcendental change. This last has been fully considered in the course of our work. Far from being denial of the will, suicide is a phenomenon of strong assertion of will; for the essence of negation lies in this, that the joys of life are shunned, not its sorrows. The suicide wills life, and is only dissatisfied with the conditions under which it has presented itself to him. He therefore by no means surrenders the will to live, but only life, in that he destroys the individual manifestation. He wills life—wills the unrestricted existence and assertion of the body; but the complication of circumstances does not allow this, and there results for him great suffering. The very will to live finds itself so much hampered in this particular manifestation that it cannot put forth its energies. It therefore comes to such a determination as is in conformity with its own nature, which lies outside the conditions of the principle of sufficient reason, and to which, therefore, all particular manifestations are alike indifferent, inasmuch as it itself remains unaffected by all appearing and passing away, and is the inner life of all things; for that firm inward assurance by reason of which we all live free from the constant dread of death, the assurance that a phenomenal existence can never be wanting to the will, supports our action even in the case of suicide. Thus the will to live appears just as much in suicide (Siva) as in the satisfaction of self-preservation (Vishnu) and in the sensual pleasure of procreation (Brahma). This is the inner meaning of the unity of the Trimurtis, which is embodied in

its entirety in every human being, though in time it raises now one, now another, of its three heads. Suicide stands in the same relation to the denial of the will as the individual thing does to the Idea. The suicide denies only the individual, not the species. We have already seen that as life is always assured to the will to live, and as sorrow is inseparable from life, suicide, the willful destruction of the single phenomenal existence, is a vain and foolish act; for the thing-in-itself remains unaffected by it, even as the rainbow endures however fast the drops which support it for the moment may change. But, more than this, it is also the masterpiece of Maya, as the most flagrant example of the contradiction of the will to live with itself. As we found this contradiction in the case of the lowest manifestations of will, in the permanent struggle of all the forces of nature, and of all organic individuals for matter and time and space; and as we saw this antagonism come ever more to the front with terrible distinctness in the ascending grades of the objectification of the will, so at last in the highest grade, the Idea of man, it reaches the point at which, not only the individuals which express the same Idea extirpate each other, but even the same individual declares war against itself. The vehemence with which it wills life, and revolts against what hinders it, namely, suffering, brings it to the point of destroying itself; so that the individual will, by its own act, puts an end to that body which is merely its particular visible expression, rather than permit suffering to break the will. Just because the suicide cannot give up willing, he gives up living. The will asserts itself here even in putting an end to its own manifestation, because it can no longer assert itself otherwise. As, however, it was just the suffering which it so shuns that was able, as mortification of the will, to bring it to the denial of itself, and hence to freedom, so in this respect the suicide is like a sick man, who, after a painful operation which would entirely cure him has been begun, will not allow it to be completed, but prefers to retain his disease. Suffering approaches and reveals itself as the possibility of the denial of will; but the will rejects it, in that it destroys the body, the manifestation of itself, in order that it may remain unbroken. This is the reason why almost all ethical teachers, whether philosophical or religious, condemn suicide, although they themselves can only give far-fetched sophistical reasons for their opinion. But if a human being was ever restrained from committing suicide by purely moral motives, the inmost meaning of this self-conquest (in whatever ideas his reason may have clothed it) was this: "I will not shun suffering, in order that it may help to put an end to the will to live, whose manifestation is so wretched, by so strengthening the knowledge of the real nature of the world which is already beginning to dawn upon me, that it may become the final quieter of my will, and may free me for ever."

It is well known that from time to time cases occur in which the act of suicide extends to the children. The father first kills the children he loves, and then himself. Now, if we consider that conscience, religion, and all influencing ideas teach him to look upon murder as the greatest of crimes, and that, in spite of this, he yet commits it, in the hour of his own death, and when he is altogether uninfluenced by any egotistical motive, such a deed can only be explained in the following manner: in this case, the will of the individual, the father, recognizes itself immediately in the children, though involved in the delusion of mistaking the appearance for the true nature; and as he is at the same time deeply impressed with the knowledge of the misery of all life, he now thinks to put an end to the inner nature itself, along with the appearance, and thus seeks to deliver from existence and its misery both himself and his children, in whom he discerns himself as living again. It would be an error precisely analogous to this to suppose that one may reach the same end as is attained through voluntary chastity by frustrating the aim of nature in fecundation; or indeed if, in consideration of the unendurable suffering of life, parents were to

use means for the destruction of their new-born children, instead of doing everything possible to ensure life to that which is struggling into it. For if the will to live is there, as it is the only metaphysical reality, or the thing-in-itself, no physical force can break it, but can only destroy its manifestation at this place and time. It itself can never be transcended except through knowledge. Thus the only way of salvation is, that the will shall manifest itself unrestrictedly, in order that in this individual manifestation it may come to apprehend its own nature. Only as the result of this knowledge can the will transcend itself, and thereby end the suffering which is inseparable from its manifestation. It is quite impossible to accomplish this end by physical force, as by destroying the germ, or by killing the newborn child, or by committing suicide. Nature guides the will to the light, just because it is only in the light that it can work out its salvation. Therefore the aims of Nature are to be promoted in every way as soon as the will to live, which is its inner being, has determined itself.

There is a species of suicide which seems to be quite distinct from the common kind, though its occurrence has perhaps not yet been fully established. It is starvation, voluntarily chosen on the ground of extreme asceticism. All instances of it, however, have been accompanied and obscured by much religious fanaticism, and even superstition. Yet it seems that the absolute denial of will may reach the point at which the will shall be wanting to take the necessary nourishment for the support of the natural life. This kind of suicide is so far from being the result of the will to live, that such a completely resigned ascetic only ceases to live because he has already altogether ceased to will. No other death than that by starvation is in this case conceivable (unless it were the result of some special superstition); for the intention to cut short the torment would itself be a stage in the assertion of will. The dogmas which satisfy the reason of such a penitent delude him with the idea that a being of a higher nature has inculcated the fasting to which his own inner tendency drives him. Old examples of this may be found. . . . But I will give here a more recent case of this kind, if it were only to ensure the preservation of one of the rare instances of this striking and extraordinary phenomenon of human nature, which, to all appearance at any rate, belongs to the category to which I wish to assign it and could hardly be explained in any other way. This case is reported in the "Niimberger Correspondenten" of the 29th July 1813, in these words:—"We hear from Bern that in a thick wood near Thurnen a hut has been discovered in which was lying the body of a man who had been dead about a month. His clothes gave little or no clue to his social position. Two very fine shirts lay beside him. The most important article, however, was a Bible interleaved with white paper, part of which had been written upon by the deceased. In this writing he gives the date of his departure from home (but does not mention where his home was). He then says that he was driven by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to pray and fast. During his journey he had fasted seven days and then he had again taken food. After this he had begun again to fast, and continued to do so for the same number of days as before. From this point we find each day marked with a stroke, and of these there are five, at the expiration of which the pilgrim presumably died. There was further found a letter to a clergyman about a sermon which the deceased heard him preach, but the letter was not addressed." Between this voluntary death arising from extreme asceticism and the common suicide resulting from despair there may be various intermediate species and combinations, though this is hard to find out. But human nature has depths, obscurities, and perplexities, the analysis and elucidation of which is a matter of the very greatest difficulty.

from STUDIES IN PESSIMISM

On Suicide

As far as I know, none but the votaries of monotheistic, that is to say, Jewish religions, look upon suicide as a crime. This is all the more striking, inasmuch as neither in the Old nor in the New Testament is there to be found any prohibition or positive disapproval of it; so that religious teachers are forced to base their condemnation of suicide on philosophical grounds of their own invention. These are so very bad that writers of this kind endeavor to make up for the weakness of their arguments by the strong terms in which they express their abhorrence of the practice; in other words, they declaim against it. They tell us that suicide is the greatest piece of cowardice; that only a madman could be guilty of it; and other insipidities of the same kind; or else they make the nonsensical remark that suicide is *wrong*; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person.

Suicide, as I have said, is actually accounted a crime; and a crime which, especially under the vulgar bigotry that prevails in England, is followed by an ignominious burial and the seizure of the man's property; and for that reason, in a case of suicide, the jury almost always bring in a verdict of insanity. Now let the reader's own moral feelings decide as to whether or not suicide is a criminal act. Think of the impression that would be made upon you by the news that someone you know had committed the crime, say, of murder or theft, or been guilty of some act of cruelty or deception; and compare it with your feelings when you hear that he has met a voluntary death. While in the one case a lively sense of indignation and extreme resentment will be aroused, and you will call loudly for punishment or revenge, in the other you will be moved to grief and sympathy; and mingled with your thoughts will be admiration for his courage, rather than the moral disapproval which follows upon a wicked action. Who has not had acquaintances, friends, relations, who of their own free will have left this world; and are these to be thought of with horror as criminals? Most emphatically No! I am rather of opinion that the clergy should be challenged to explain what right they have to go into the pulpit, or take up their pens, and stamp as a crime an action which many men whom we hold in affection and honor have committed; and to refuse an honorable burial to those who relinquish this world voluntarily. They have no Biblical authority to boast of, as justifying their condemnation of suicide; nay, not even any philosophical arguments that will hold water; and it must be understood that it is arguments we want, and that we will not be put off with mere phrases or words of abuse. If the criminal law forbids suicide, that is not an argument valid in the Church; and besides, the prohibition is ridiculous; for what penalty can frighten a man who is not afraid of death itself? If the law punishes people for trying to commit suicide, it is punishing the want of skill that makes the attempt a failure. . . .

In my chief work I have explained the only valid reason existing against suicide on the score of morality. It is this: that suicide thwarts the attainment of the highest moral aim by the fact that, for a real release from this world of misery, it substitutes one that is merely apparent. But from a *mistake* to a *crime* is a far cry; and it is as a crime that the clergy of Christendom wish us to regard suicide.

The inmost kernel of Christianity is the truth that suffering—*the Cross*—is the real end and object of life. Hence Christianity condemns suicide as thwarting this end; whilst the ancient world, taking a lower point of view, held it in approval, nay, in honor. But if that is to be accounted a valid reason against suicide, it involves the recognition of asceticism; that is to say, it is valid

only from a much higher ethical standpoint than has ever been adopted by moral philosophers in Europe. If we abandon that high standpoint, there is no tenable reason left, on the score of morality, for condemning suicide. The extraordinary energy and zeal with which the clergy of monotheistic religions attack suicide is not supported either by any passages in the Bible or by any considerations of weight; so that it looks as though they must have some secret reason for their contention. May it not be this—that the voluntary surrender of life is a bad compliment for him who said that *all things were very good?* If this is so, it offers another instance of the crass optimism of these religions,—denouncing suicide to escape being denounced by it. . . .

. . . Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment—a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to an answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer.

GIACOMO LEOPARDI (1798–1837)

from *Dialogue Between Plotinus and Porphyry*

(expanded in Archive)

The Italian writer Count Giacomo Leopardi was born in the provincial town of Recanati, in Marche, Italy. His home environment was oppressive. Leopardi was also plagued by continual physical maladies from an early age, including a spinal condition that made him a hunchback. Precocious from childhood, by the age of 16 Leopardi had read all the Latin and Greek classics, could write in several languages, and had written essays on classics, astronomy, and history. In 1816, partly under the influence of his friend Pietro Giordani, Leopardi turned his attention to literature: he began work on the 61-poem collection I canti *(1831, 1835, 1845), containing poems written from 1819 to 1837. In these poems, Leopardi espoused a pessimistic philosophy, revealing a belief in a meaningless and alienating universe that offers no hope. He presents a philosophy of despair, exhibiting the triumph of evil, the insignificance of existence, and the allurement of death.*

In 1822, Leopardi left Recanati for a three-month stay in Rome, which he found to be a corrupt society hostile to novel ideas. Disillusioned and unable to find work, he reluctantly returned to his oppressive hometown. In 1825, he went to Bologna and Milan to continue his writing, but physical and financial problems forced a return; trips to Florence and Pisa in 1827–28 also ended in a return. Two years later, he received a loan from friends and was finally able to leave "that horrible nightmare of Recanati." Leopardi's other writings from this time are united in their search for beauty and truth in an antagonistic world. Leopardi retired to Naples in 1833, where he lived with continuous physical suffering and hopeless despondency until his death in 1837.

Leopardi asserts that suicide, unlike death, is not a grand negation of existence but an act directed against the share of unhappiness that pervades human life, and therefore solves nothing. In the "Dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyrius," published in Opperette Morali *(1827, 1834, and*

1835), Leopardi simulates a debate between two neo-Platonist Roman philosophers about whether suicide violates the rules of nature. Plotinus (204/205–270) [q.v.], ascetic and otherworldly, was the teacher of Porphyrius (known in English as Porphyry, c. 234–305), who became disillusioned with life and suicidal after studying his teacher's philosophy. Porphyry's arguments for suicide include the claim that all perception is false except for "ennui" (described by Leopardi as a sublime sentiment experienced only by the intelligent), that Plato's [q.v.] restrictions on self-destruction and his idea of heaven are ruinous, and that the unnatural effects of civilization upon human life justify an unnatural means to end the suffering they inflict. Plotinus counters him with assertions that suicide is selfish, against strict natural laws, and overemphasizes the gravity of suffering in the brief span of a human life.

Source

Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyrius," in *Essays and Dialogues of Giacomo Leopardi*, tr. Charles Edwards. London: Trübner and Co., 1882, pp. 182–196.

from DIALOGUE BETWEEN PLOTINUS AND PORPHYRY

"One day when I, Porphyrius, was meditating about taking my own life, Plotinus guessed my intention. He interrupted me, and said that such a design could not proceed from a healthy mind, but was due to some melancholy indisposition, and that I must have change of air.". . . .

Plotinus. You know, Porphyrius, how sincerely I am your friend. You will not wonder therefore that I am unquiet about you. For some time I have noticed how sad and thoughtful you are; your expression of countenance is unusual, and you have let fall certain words which make me anxious. In short, I fear that you contemplate some evil design.

Porphyrius. How! What do you mean?

Plotinus. I think you intend to do yourself some injury; it were a bad omen to give the deed its name. . . . Let us then talk calmly, weighing our words. Open your heart to me. Tell me your troubles, and let me be auditor of your lamentations. I have deserved your confidence. I promise, on my part, not to oppose the carrying out of your resolution, if we agree that it is useful and reasonable. . . .

Porphyrius. If you wish to discuss the subject, I will not refuse, in spite of my dislike to do so; for on such occasions the mind prefers to encompass itself with a lofty silence, and to meditate in solitude, giving itself up for the time to a state of complete self-absorption. Nevertheless, I am willing to do as you please.

In the first place, I may say that my design is not the consequence of any special misfortune. It is simply the result of an utter weariness of life, and a continuous ennui which has long possessed me like a pain. To this may be added a feeling of the vanity and nothingness of all things, which pervades me in body and soul. Do not say that this disposition of mind is unreasonable, though I will allow that it may in part proceed from physical causes. It is in itself perfectly reasonable, and therein differs from all our other dispositions; for everything which makes us attach some value to life and human things, proves on analysis to be contrary to reason, and to proceed from some illusion or falsity. Nothing is more rational than ennui. Pleasures are all unreal. Pain itself, at least mental pain, is equally false, because on examination it is seen to have scarcely any

foundation, or none at all. The same may be said of fear and hope. Ennui alone, which is born from the vanity of things, is genuine, and never deceives. If, then, all else be vain, the reality of life is summed up in ennui. . . .

Plotinus. You know Plato refused to allow that man is at liberty to escape, like a fugitive slave, from the captivity in which he is placed by the will of the gods, in depriving himself of life.

Porphyrius. I beg you, dear Plotinus, to leave Plato alone now, with his doctrines and dreams. It is one thing to praise, explain, and champion certain theories in the schools and in books, but quite another to practically exemplify them. . . . It is true Plato is said to have spread abroad by his writings the notion of a future life, thus leaving men in doubt as to their fate after death, and serving a good purpose in deterring men from evil in this life, through fear of punishment in the next. If I imagined Plato to have been the inventor of these ideas and beliefs, I would speak thus to him:—

"You observe, O Plato, how inimical to our race the power which governs the world has always been, weather known as Nature, Destiny, or Fate. Many reasons contradict the supposition that man has that high rank in the order of creation which we are pleased to imagine; but by no reason can he be deprived of the characteristic attributed to him by Homer—that of suffering. Nature, however, has given us a remedy for all evils. It is death, little feared by those who are not fully intelligent, and by all others desired.

"But you have deprived us of this dearest consolation of our life, full of suffering that it is. The doubts raised by you have torn this comfort from our minds, and made the thought of death the bitterest of all thoughts. Thanks to you, unhappy mortals now fear the storm less than the port. Driven from their one place of repose, and robbed of the only remedy they could look for, they resign themselves to the sufferings and troubles of life. Thus, you have been more cruel towards us than Destiny, Nature, or Fate. . . .

"Violence and injustice are not arrested, for evil-doers only realise the terrors of death in their last moments, when quite powerless to do more harm. Your doubts trouble only the good, who are more disposed to benefit than injure their fellow-men, and the weak and timid, who are neither inclined by nature nor disposition to oppress anyone. Bold and strong men, who have scarcely any power of imagination, and those who require some other restraint than mere law, regard these fears as chimerical, and are undeterred from evil doing. . . .

"Perhaps, however, you will reply that you have promised a reward in the future for the good. What then is this reward? A state of life which seems full of ennui, even less tolerable than our present existence! . . . In short, we cannot look for happiness in the world to come; and however clear a man's conscience may be, or however upright his life, in his last hour he will dread the future with its terrible incertitude. It is due to your teaching that fear is a much stronger influence than hope, and may be said to dominate mankind. . . .

"But what cruelty can exceed that of your law, forbidding man to put an end to his sufferings and troubles by voluntarily depriving himself of life, thereby triumphing over the horrors of death? Other animals do not desire to put an end to their life, because their unhappiness is less than ours; nor would they even have sufficient courage to face a voluntary death. But if they did wish to die, what should deter them from fulfilling their desire? They are affected by no prohibition, nor fear of the future. Here again you make us inferior to brute beasts. The liberty they possess, they do not use; the liberty granted also to us by Nature, so miserly in her gifts, you take away. . . .

"Besides, the mere thought of being able to quit life at pleasure, and withdraw from the miseries of the world, is so great an alleviation of our lot, that in itself it suffices to render existence supportable. Consequently, there can be no doubt that our chief unhappiness proceeds from the fear, that in abbreviating our life we might be plunged into a state of greater misery than the present. . . .

Plotinus. Porphyrius, you know how I revere Plato; yet in talking to you on such an occasion as this, I will give you my own opinion, and will disregard his authority. The few words of his that I spoke were rather as an introduction, than anything else. Returning to my first argument, I affirm that not only Plato and every other philosopher, but Nature herself, teaches us that it is improper to take away our own life. . . . It is indeed an action the most contrary possible to nature. The whole order of things would be subverted if the beings of the world destroyed themselves. And it is repugnant and absurd to suppose that life is given only to be taken away by its possessor, and that beings should exist only to become non-existent . . . do we not instinctively fear, hate, and shun death, even in spite of ourselves? Therefore, since suicide is so utterly contrary to our nature, I cannot think that it is permissible.

. . . Nature, you say, forbids suicide. It is a strange thing that since she is either unable or unwilling to make me happy, or free me from unhappiness, she should have the power to force me to live. If Nature has given us a love of life, and a hatred of death, she has also given us a love of happiness, and a hatred of suffering; and the latter instincts are much more powerful than the former, because happiness is the supreme aim of all our actions and sentiments of love or hatred. For to what end do we shun death, or desire life, save to promote our well-being, and for fear of the contrary?

How then can it be unnatural to escape from suffering in the only way open to man, that is, by dying; since in life it can never be avoided? How, too, can it be true, that Nature forbids me to devote myself to death, which is undoubtedly a good thing, and to reject life, which is undoubtedly an evil and injurious thing, since it is a source of nothing but suffering to me?

Plotinus. These things do not persuade me that suicide is not unnatural. Have we not a strong instinctive horror of death? Besides, we never see brute beasts . . . either commit suicide, or regard death as anything but a condition to be struggled against, even in their moments of greatest suffering. In short, all men who commit this desperate act, will be found to have lived out of conformity to nature. . . .

Porphyrius. Well, if you like, I will admit that the action is contrary to nature. But what has that to do with it, if we ourselves do not conform to nature; that is, are no longer savages? . . . Savages never wish to commit suicide, nor does their imagination induce them to regard death as a desirable thing; whereas we who are civilised wish for it, and sometimes voluntarily seek it.

Now, if man be permitted to live unnaturally, and be consequently unhappy, why may he not also die unnaturally? For death is indeed the only way by which he can deliver himself from the unhappiness that results from civilization. Or, why not return to our primitive condition, and state of nature? . . . What is less natural than medicine? By this I mean surgery, and the use drugs. They are both ordinary used expressly to combat nature, and are quite unknown to brute beasts and savages. . . . Similarly, suicide, which is a radical cure for the disease of despair, one of the outcomes of civilisation, must not be blamed because it is unnatural; for unnatural evils require unnatural remedies. It would indeed be hard and unjust that reason, which increases our misery by forcing us to go contrary to nature, should in this matter join hands with nature, and take from us our only remaining hope and refuge, and the only resource consistent with itself, and should force us to continue in our wretchedness.

The truth is this, Plotinus. Our primitive nature has departed from us for ever. Habit and reason have given us a new nature in place of the old one, to which we shall never return. Formerly, it was unnatural for men to commit suicide, or desire death. In the present day, both are natural. They conform to our new nature, which however, like the old one, still impels us to seek our happiness. And since death is our greatest good, is it remarkable that men should voluntarily seek it? For our reason tells us that death is not an evil, but, as the remedy for all evils, is the most desirable of things.

Now tell me: are all other actions of civilised men regulated by the standard of their primitive nature? If so, give me a single instance. No, it is our present and not our primitive nature, that interprets our action; in other words, it is our reason. Why then should suicide alone be judged unreasonably, and from the aspect of our primitive nature? Why should this latter, which has no influence over our life, control our death which rules our life? . . .

Plotinus. [I]f the deed be permissible, I have no doubt of its extreme utility. But I will never admit that a forbidden and improper action can be useful. The matter really resolves itself into this: which is the better, to suffer or not to suffer? It is certain that most men would prefer suffering mixed with enjoyment, so ardently do we desire and thirst after joy. But this is beside the question, because enjoyment and pleasure, properly speaking, are as impossible as suffering is inevitable. I mean a suffering as continuous as our never satisfied desire for pleasure and happiness, and quite apart from the peculiar and accidental suffering which must infallibly be experienced by even the happiest of men. . . .

Porphyrius. It seems to me that ennui alone, and the fact that we cannot hope for an improved existence, are sufficiently cogent reasons to induce a desire for death, even though our condition be one of prosperity. . . . Princes are, I imagine, more liable than other men to feel a hatred of their condition, and to think favourably of suicide. For have they not reached the summit of what is called human happiness? They have nothing to hope for, because they have everything that forms a part of the so-called good things of this life. They cannot anticipate greater pleasure to-morrow than they have enjoyed to-day. . . .

But be that as it may. We see that there is nothing to prevent men voluntarily quitting life, and preferring death, save the fear of another world. All other reasons are probably ill-founded. . . .

Plotinus. That is true, dear Porphyrius. But nevertheless, let me advise, nay implore, you to listen to the counsels of Nature rather than Reason. Follow the instincts of that primitive Nature, mother of us all, who, though she has manifested no affection for us in creating us for unhappiness, is a less bitter and cruel foe than our own reason, with its boundless curiosity, speculation, chattering, dream, ideas, and miserable learning. . . . And I assure you that neither disgust of life, nor despair, nor the sense of the nullity of things, the vanity of all anxiety, and the insignificance of man, nor hatred of the world and oneself, are of long duration; although such dispositions of mind are perfectly reasonable, and the contrary unreasonable. For our physical condition changes momentarily in more or less degree; and often without any especial cause life endears itself to us again, and new hopes give brightness to human things, which once more seem worthy of some attention, not indeed from our understanding, but from what may be termed the higher senses of the intellect. . . .

Whether suicide be reasonable, or our compromise with life unreasonable, the former is certainly a horrible and inhuman action. It were better to follow Nature, and remain man, than act like a monster in following Reason. Besides, ought we not to give some thought to

the friends, relatives, acquaintances, and people with whom we have been accustomed to live, and from whom we should thus separate for ever? And if the thought of such separation be nothing to us, ought we not to consider their feeling? . . . He who scarcely troubles himself about the grief his death would cause to his friends and family is selfish; he cares little for others, and all for himself. And truly, the suicide thinks only of himself. He desires nought but his personal welfare, and throws away all thought of the rest of the world. In short, suicide is an action of the most unqualified and sordid egotism, and is certainly the least attractive form of self-love that exists in the world.

. . . And indeed, life itself is of so little importance, that man ought not to trouble himself much either to retain or abandon it; and, without thinking greatly about it, we ought to give the former instinct precedence over the latter.

Now I earnestly entreat you, dear Porphyrius, by the memory of our long friendship, put away this idea. Do not grieve your friends, who love you with such warm affection, and your Plotinus, who has no dearer nor better friend in the world. Help us to bear the burden of life, instead of leaving us without thought. Let us live, dear Porphyrius, and console each other. Let us not refuse our share of the suffering of humanity, apportioned to us by destiny. Let us cling to each other with mutual encouragement, and hand in hand strengthen one another better to bear the troubles of life. . . .

JOHN STUART MILL (1806–1873)

from *Autobiography* (expanded in Archive)
from *Deaths of Casimir Perier and Georges Cuvier*
from *Penal Code for India* (expanded in Archive)
from *Diary, March 8, 1854* (in Archive only)
from *On Liberty* (expanded in Archive)

The British economist and philosopher John Stuart Mill was born in Pentonville, London. His father, James Mill, was a philosopher who had strong ties to Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo, and was himself a strict proponent of the utilitarian philosophy. According to his belief that the mind is a blank sheet at birth, upon which anything may be recorded, James Mill brought up his son with a strict, rigorous, and intricate education beginning with Greek at the age of three. The son was a brilliant student with extensive interests in French literature, social conditions, and economic and political theory, but he abandoned his early intention to enter law and instead took a series of positions with his father at the East India Company. By the age of 20, he was known as a foremost proponent of Utilitarianism. After his father's death, he served from 1836–1856 in charge of relations with native states in India, and

retired with a pension when the East India Company was dissolved in 1858. He was a campaigner for women's suffrage. A member of Parliament from 1865–1868, he was, famously, the first person in its history to call for women to be given the right to vote. His longtime companion and literary collaborator, Mrs. Harriet Taylor, became his wife in 1851; Mill credits her with extensive influence, indeed virtual co-authorship, in much of his writing, especially their "joint production" On Liberty *(1859). Mill's works also include* Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform *(1859),* Utilitarianism *(appeared 1861 in* Fraser's Magazine*, and as a book in 1863),* The Subjection of Women *(1869), and* Autobiography*, composed in the 1850's, revised in the 1860's, and published in the year of his death, 1873.*

It is remarkable that Mill's work contains no discussion of the ethical issues in suicide. Of all philosophers concerned with moral issues, Mill might seem to be the one for whom this issue would prove the greatest challenge. On the one hand, Mill's famous argument in On Liberty *suggests he might take a permissive position, perhaps even stronger than that of Hume [q.v.]: Mill argues that persons whose choices are made in informed, uncoerced, and unimpaired ways ought not to be interfered with; this is Mill's view against the form of paternalism that seeks to impose one party's values upon another. At the same time, however, there are other elements in* On Liberty *that suggest he might not think choices of suicide permissible after all—particularly his argument that, even if the choice is a freely made one, one ought not sell oneself into slavery, since one thus loses the liberty that is to be protected; "The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free." Mill does not say whether he would apply this principle to ending one's own life—and in particular, whether suicide would be wrong because it limits freedom, or permissible because it initiates death, in which one is nonexistent, neither free nor unfree. It is implausible then to suppose that Mill was unfamiliar with the issue; a vigorous debate had raged in England from Donne [q.v.] to Hume [q.v.] and later, and Mill would have been familiar with the Stoic authors [q.v., esp. under Chrysippus, Seneca] as well. He was personally acquainted with the issue of suicide, given the suicides of his close friend Eyton Tooke in 1830 and his brother George Grote Mill, who was in the late stages of tuberculosis, in 1853.*

Mill makes a passing reference to suicide in Utilitarianism. *When considering objections to the theory he is defending, he remarks ". . . even in that case, something might still be said for the utilitarian theory; since utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness; and if the former aim be chimerical, there will be all the greater scope and more imperative need for the latter, so long at least as mankind think fit to live, and do not take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by Novalis [q.v.]." However, he does not discuss the ethics of suicide directly in any text.*

The selections provided here are thus negative cases permitting only indirect inferences about Mill's views. The first is an account of Mill's experience with severe depression during the years 1826–27. He remarks that he seemed to have nothing left to live for, that pleasures are insufficient to make life desirable, and that he frequently asked himself if he could, or if he was bound to go on living; such depression is often associated with suicide. In the second selection, Mill is writing of the death of Casimir Perier, the 11th prime minister of France, who had restored civic order and reestablished France's credit in Europe; Perier died in 1832 at the age of 54 from a fever contracted when he visited hospitals during an outbreak of cholera in Paris. The third selection is from Mill's writings on India. He was interested in the development and defense of the proposed penal code for India, which in effect would establish British law for Indian citizens when it was enacted in 1860. Mill reproduces some of this text in his essay Penal Code for India *(1838). The selection provided here distinguishes between the more severe penalties to be imposed on persons who aid or abet suicide in incompetent individuals*

(e.g., children, the insane, the intoxicated) and the less severe penalties for those who aid the suicide of a competent person. This passage may seem to correspond with his views about paternalism. Mill's brief diary entry for March 8, 1854, hints obliquely at the issue of rationality in suicide.

Finally, the excerpts from On Liberty *exhibit vividly the tension in his thought that would come to the fore if he had addressed the topic of suicide directly. It is extraordinary that Mill did not do so, given the centrality of the challenge this issue would constitute for his thinking about autonomy and paternalism. One might expect him to endorse a "right to die" under conditions such as maturity, rational capacity, and attention to one's obligations to others; but at the same time, the depth of his personal experiences and his sensitivity to the many impairments of rationality might suggest he would hold that choices of suicide could not be rational or ought not to be respected. Nor does he address the permissibility of suicide prevention in a person who is competent and uncoerced. In chapter 5, "Applications," he does hold it permissible for the state to restrict the sale of poisons by means of antecedent precautions that will ward off crimes, including murder, but does not address whether it would be permissible for the state to try to prevent what was then, legally, the crime of self-murder. Elijah Millgram suggests an explanation: given the ferocity of the debate over this issue at the time, Mill was well aware that he would only alienate listeners by taking one side or the other and thus would detract from the potential audience for his other, more central views.*

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from AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A CRISIS IN MY MENTAL HISTORY; ONE STAGE ONWARD

. . . From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham, and especially from the commencement of the *Westminster Review*, I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object. . . . This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and

the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence. But the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream. It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent; the state, I should think, in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first "conviction of sin." In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.

At first I hoped that the cloud would pass away of itself; but it did not. A night's sleep, the sovereign remedy for the smaller vexations of life, had no effect on it. I awoke to a renewed consciousness of the woeful fact. I carried it with me into all companies, into all occupations. Hardly anything had power to cause me even a few minutes oblivion of it. For some months the cloud seemed to grow thicker and thicker. The lines in Coleridge's "Dejection"—I was not then acquainted with them—exactly describe my case:

> *"A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,*
> *A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief,*
> *Which finds no natural outlet or relief*
> *In word, or sigh, or tear."*

In vain I sought relief from my favourite books; those memorials of past nobleness and greatness from which I had always hitherto drawn strength and animation. I read them now without feeling, or with the accustomed feeling *minus* all its charm; and I became persuaded, that my love of mankind, and of excellence for its own sake, had worn itself out. I sought no comfort by speaking to others of what I felt. If I had loved any one sufficiently to make confiding my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was. I felt, too, that mine was not an interesting, or in any way respectable distress. There was nothing in it to attract sympathy. Advice, if I had known where to seek it, would have been most precious. . . . But there was no one on whom I could build the faintest hope of such assistance. My father, to whom it would have been natural to me to have recourse in any practical difficulties, was the last person to whom, in such a case as this, I looked for help. Everything convinced me that he had no knowledge of any such mental state as I was suffering from, and that even if he could be made to understand it, he was not the physician who could heal it. My education, which was wholly his work, had been conducted without any regard to the possibility of its ending in this result; and I saw no use in giving him the pain of thinking that his plans had failed, when the failure was probably irremediable, and, at all events, beyond the power of *his* remedies. Of other friends, I had at that time none to whom I had any hope of making my condition intelligible. It was however abundantly intelligible to myself; and the more I dwelt upon it, the more hopeless it appeared. . . .

. . . All those to whom I looked up, were of opinion that the pleasure of sympathy with human beings, and the feelings which made the good of others, and especially of mankind on a large scale, the object of existence, were the greatest and surest sources of happiness. Of the

truth of this I was convinced, but to know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling. My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of my mind. I was thus, as I said to myself, left stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail; without any real desire for the ends which I had been so carefully fitted out to work for: no delight in virtue, or the general good, but also just as little in anything else. The fountains of vanity and ambition seemed to have dried up within me, as completely as those of benevolence. I had had (as I reflected) some gratification of vanity at too early an age: I had obtained some distinction, and felt myself of some importance, before the desire of distinction and of importance had grown into a passion: and little as it was which I had attained, yet having been attained too early, like all pleasures enjoyed too soon, it had made me *blasé* and indifferent to the pursuit. Thus neither selfish nor unselfish pleasures were pleasures to me. And there seemed no power in nature sufficient to begin the formation of my character anew, and create in a mind now irretrievably analytic, fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire.

These were the thoughts which mingled with the dry heavy dejection of the melancholy winter of 1826–7. During this time I was not incapable of my usual occupations. I went on with them mechanically, by the mere force of habit. I had been so drilled in a certain sort of mental exercise, that I could still carry it on when all the spirit had gone out of it. . . .

. . . In all probability my case was by no means so peculiar as I fancied it, and I doubt not that many others have passed through a similar state; but the idiosyncrasies of my education had given to the general phenomenon a special character, which made it seem the natural effect of causes that it was hardly possible for time to remove. I frequently asked myself, if I could, or if I was bound to go on living, when life must be passed in this manner. I generally answered to myself, that I did not think I could possibly bear it beyond a year. When, however, not more than half that duration of time had elapsed, a small ray of light broke in upon my gloom. I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's "*Memoirs*," and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them—would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone. I had still, it seemed, some of the material out of which all worth of character, and all capacity for happiness, are made. . . .

from DEATHS OF CASIMIR PERIER AND GEORGES CUVIER

. . . For it is ill dying a martyr to a falling cause, when that cause is also one which ought to fall. Cranmer and Latimer and Ridley will live for ever; but is it for his martyrdom that we

remember Sir Thomas More? Devotion to a long line of kings, or to a constitution which has stood the shock of ages, though now rotten, and worm-eaten, and harbouring unclean vermin, we can understand. But to die for a temporary compromise, a patch-work of yesterday, a thing constructed on no principle, to which no human being ever carried hypocrisy so far as to pretend to have any attachment, to which nobody affects to look for any guidance, but only for keeping him from being robbed or murdered;—to be martyred for worshiping at an empty shrine—without an oracle, without a God, without even an idol; no Gothic cathedral or Grecian temple, but a wooden shed, run up in a hurry, because any shelter was better than the open sky, and which men resort to, not because it is good, but because they know not whither to seek for any other—is a death little worthy of an apotheosis; no dying for one's country, but a common suicide. . . .

from PENAL CODE FOR INDIA

294. Whoever does any act, or omits what he is legally bound to do, with the intention of thereby causing, or with the knowledge that he is likely thereby to cause, the death of any person, and does by such act or omission cause the death of any person, is said to commit the offence of "Voluntary culpable homicide."

Illustrations

(a). A, with the intention or knowledge aforesaid, gives Z his choice whether Z will kill himself, or suffer lingering torture. Z kills himself in consequence. A has committed the offence of voluntary culpable homicide.

298. Voluntary culpable homicide is "voluntary culpable homicide by consent," when the person whose death is caused, being above twelve years of age, suffers death, or takes the risk of death, by his own choice:

Provided,

First, That the offender does not induce the person whose death is caused to make that choice, by directly or indirectly putting that person in fear of any injury;

Secondly, That the person whose death has been caused is not, from youth, mental imbecility, derangement, intoxication, or passion, unable to understand the nature and consequences of his choice;

Thirdly, That the offender does not know that the person whose death is caused was induced to make the choice by any deception, or concealment;

Fourthly, That the offender does not conceal from the person whose death is caused anything which the offender knew to be likely to cause that person to change his mind.

Explanation.—Voluntary culpable homicide committed by inducing a person voluntarily to put himself to death is voluntary culpable homicide by consent, except when it is murder.

Illustrations

(a). Z, a Hindoo widow, consents to be burned with the corpse of her husband. A kindles the pile. Here A has committed voluntary culpable homicide by consent.
(b). A, by instigation, voluntarily causes Z, a child under twelve years of age, to commit suicide. Here, on account of Z's youth, the offence cannot be voluntary culpable homicide by consent. A has therefore committed murder.
(c). A, by deceiving Z into a belief that Z's family have perished at sea, voluntarily causes Z to commit suicide. Here, on account of the deception practised by A, the offence cannot be voluntary culpable homicide by consent. A has therefore committed murder. . . .
302. Whoever commits voluntary culpable homicide by consent shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to fourteen years and must not be less than two years, and shall also be liable to fine. . . .
306. If any child under twelve years of age, any insane person, any delirious person, any idiot, or any person in a state of intoxication, commits suicide, whoever previously abets by aid the commission of such suicide shall be punished with death or transportation for life, or rigorous imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.
307. If any person commits suicide, whoever previously abets by aid the commission of such suicide shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to fourteen years, and must not be less than two years, and shall also be liable to fine.

from ON LIBERTY

Introductory

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns

himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. . . .

. . . No society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government; and none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified. The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest. . . .

Applications

One of these examples [of restrictions on trade], that of the sale of poisons, opens a new question; the proper limits of what may be called the functions of police; how far liberty may legitimately be invaded for the prevention of crime, or of accident. It is one of the undisputed functions of government to take precautions against crime before it has been committed, as well as to detect and punish it afterwards. The preventive function of government, however, is far more liable to be abused, to the prejudice of liberty, than the punitory function; for there is hardly any part of the legitimate freedom of action of a human being which would not admit of being represented, and fairly too, as increasing the facilities for some form or other of delinquency. Nevertheless, if a public authority, or even a private person, sees any one evidently preparing to commit a crime, they are not bound to look on inactive until the crime is committed, but may interfere to prevent it. If poisons were never bought or used for any purpose except the commission of murder, it would be right to prohibit their manufacture and sale. They may, however, be wanted not only for innocent but for useful purposes, and restrictions cannot be imposed in the one case without operating in the other. Again, it is a proper office of public authority to guard against accidents. If either a public officer or any one else saw a person attempting to cross a bridge which had been ascertained to be unsafe, and there were no time to warn him of his danger, they might seize him and turn him back, without any real infringement of his liberty; for liberty consists in doing what one desires, and he does not desire to fall into the river. Nevertheless, when there is not a certainty, but only a danger of mischief, no one but the person himself can judge of the sufficiency of the motive which may prompt him to incur the risk: in this case, therefore, (unless he is a child, or delirious, or in some state of excitement or absorption incompatible with the full use of the reflecting faculty) he ought, I conceive, to be only warned of the danger; not forcibly prevented from exposing himself to it. Similar considerations, applied to such a question as the sale of poisons, may enable us to decide which among the possible modes of regulation are or are not contrary to principle. Such a precaution, for example, as that of labelling the drug with some word expressive of its dangerous character, may be enforced without violation of liberty: the buyer cannot wish not to know that the thing he possesses has poisonous qualities. But to require in all cases the certificate of a medical practitioner, would make it sometimes impossible, always expensive, to obtain the article for legitimate uses. The only mode apparent to me, in which difficulties may be thrown in the way of crime committed through this means, without any infringement, worth taking into account, upon the liberty of those who desire the poisonous substance for other purposes, consists in providing what, in the apt language of Bentham, is

called "preappointed evidence." This provision is familiar to every one in the case of contracts. It is usual and right that the law, when a contract is entered into, should require as the condition of its enforcing performance, that certain formalities should be observed, such as signatures, attestation of witnesses, and the like, in order that in case of subsequent dispute, there may be evidence to prove that the contract was really entered into, and that there was nothing in the circumstances to render it legally invalid: the effect being, to throw great obstacles in the way of fictitious contracts, or contracts made in circumstances which, if known, would destroy their validity. Precautions of a similar nature might be enforced in the sale of articles adapted to be instruments of crime. The seller, for example, might be required to enter into a register the exact time of the transaction, the name and address of the buyer, the precise quality and quantity sold; to ask the purpose for which it was wanted, and record the answer he received. When there was no medical prescription, the presence of some third person might be required, to bring home the fact to the purchaser, in case there should afterwards be reason to believe that the article had been applied to criminal purposes. Such regulations would in general be no material impediment to obtaining the article, but a very considerable one to making an improper use of it without detection. . . .

. . . the liberty of the individual, in things wherein the individual is alone concerned, implies a corresponding liberty in any number of individuals to regulate by mutual agreement such things as regard them jointly, and regard no persons but themselves. This question presents no difficulty, so long as the will of all the persons implicated remains unaltered; but since that will may change, it is often necessary, even in things in which they alone are concerned, that they should enter into engagements with one another; and when they do, it is fit, as a general rule, that those engagements should be kept. Yet, in the laws, probably, of every country, this general rule has some exceptions. Not only persons are not held to engagements which violate the rights of third parties, but it is sometimes considered a sufficient reason for releasing them from an engagement, that it is injurious to themselves. In this and most other civilised countries, for example, an engagement by which a person should sell himself, or allow himself to be sold, as a slave, would be null and void; neither enforced by law nor by opinion. The ground for thus limiting his power of voluntarily disposing of his own lot in life, is apparent, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. The reason for not interfering, unless for the sake of others, with a person's voluntary acts, is consideration for his liberty. His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it. But by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it, beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. He is no longer free; but is thenceforth in a position which has no longer the presumption in its favour, that would be afforded by his voluntarily remaining in it. The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom. . . .

FORBES WINSLOW (1810–1874)

from *The Anatomy of Suicide: Can Suicide Be Prevented by Legislative Enactments?*

The ninth son in a family that had lost its American property in the War of Independence and returned to England, the physician Forbes Winslow was born in Pentonville, London. He was educated at University College, London and the Middlesex Hospital. In 1835, he joined the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and subsequently received his M.D. from Aberdeen in 1849. He supported his own education through writing: he was a reporter for the Times *and also wrote medical manuals for students. His work* Physic and Physicians *(1842) was a two-volume collection of anecdotes about doctors. Winslow's rise to prominence as an expert on cases of insanity was furthered by his writings,* The Anatomy of Suicide *(1840),* The Plea of Insanity in Criminal Cases *(1843), and* The Incubation of Insanity *(1845).*

In 1847, Winslow founded two private insane asylums in Hammersmith, where he experimented with humane treatment of mental illnesses. Winslow continued to write about insanity; he founded the Quarterly Journal of Psychological Medicine *in 1848 and wrote many papers for legal and medical instruction. He was instrumental in gaining acceptance for the plea of insanity in criminal cases, including cases of suicide (*felo de se*). He died in Brighton in 1874.*

In these excerpts from The Anatomy of Suicide, *Winslow, though he sees suicide as a crime against God and man, insists that laws punishing suicide (which were still in effect in England at the time) were both unjust, since they punished the family rather than the alleged offender, and ineffective, since they did not serve as a deterrent to suicide. He is particularly interested in the way in which a kind of reasoning about suicide, a sort of obsessive perseveration with thoughts of suicide, can invite the act, particularly if it is believed to be justifiable. The remedy, for Winslow, is Christian moral education.*

Source

Forbes Winslow, *The Anatomy of Suicide*, Ch. 16, "Can Suicide Be Prevented by Legislative Enactments?—Influence of Moral Instruction." London: Henry Renshaw, 1840, pp. 36–44, 334–339.

from THE ANATOMY OF SUICIDE

CAN SUICIDE BE PREVENTED BY LEGISLATIVE ENACTMENTS?

The only legitimate object for which punishment can be inflicted is the prevention of crime. "Am I to be hanged for stealing a sheep?" said a criminal at the Old Bailey, addressing the bench. "No,"

replied the judge; "you are not to be hanged for stealing a sheep, but *that sheep may not be stolen*." Every punishment, argues Beccaria, which does not arise from absolute necessity is unjust. There should be a fixed proportion between crimes and punishments. Crimes are only to be estimated by the injury done to society; and the end of punishment is, to prevent the criminal from doing further injury, as well as to induce others from committing similar offenses.

The act of suicide ought not to be considered as a crime in the legal definition of the term. It is not an offense that can be deemed cognizable by the civil magistrate. It is to be considered a sinful and vicious action. To punish suicide as a crime is to commit a solecism in legislation. The unfortunate individual, by the very act of suicide, places himself beyond the vengeance of the law; he has anticipated its operation; he has rendered himself amenable to the highest tribunal—viz., that of his Creator; no penal enactments, however stringent, can affect him. What is the operation of the law under these circumstances? A verdict of *felo-de-se* is returned, and the innocent relations of the suicide are disgraced and branded with infamy, and that too on evidence of an *ex-parte* nature. It is unjust, inhuman, unnatural, and unchristian, that the law should punish the innocent family of the man who, in a moment of frenzy, terminates his own miserable existence. It was clearly established, that before the alteration in the law respecting suicide, the fear of being buried in a cross-road, and having a stake driven through the body, had no beneficial effect in decreasing the number of suicides; and the verdict of *felo-de-se*, now occasionally returned, is productive of no advantage whatever, and only injures the surviving relatives.

When a man contemplates an outrage of the law, the fear of the punishment awarded for the offence may deter him from its commission; but the unhappy person whose desperate circumstances impel him to sacrifice his own life can be influenced by no such fear. His whole mind is absorbed in the consideration of his own miseries, and he even cuts asunder those ties that ought to bind him closely and tenderly to the world he is about to leave. If an affectionate wife and endearing family have not influence in deterring a man from suicide, is it reasonable to suppose that he will be influenced by penal laws?

If the view which has been taken in this work of the cause of suicide be a correct one, no stronger argument can be urged for the impropriety of bringing the strong arm of the law to bear upon those who court a voluntary death. In the majority of cases, it will be found that some heavy calamity has fastened itself upon the mind, and the spirits have been extremely depressed. The individual loses all pleasure in society; hope vanishes, and despair renders life intolerable, and death an apparent relief. The evidence which is generally submitted to a coroner's jury is of necessity imperfect; and although the suicide may, to all appearance, be in possession of his right reason, and have exhibited at the moment of killing himself the greatest calmness, coolness, and self-possession, this would not justify the coroner or jury in concluding that derangement of mind was not present.

If the mind be overpowered by "grief, sickness, infirmity, or other accident," as Sir Mathew Hale expresses it, the law presumes the existence of lunacy. Any passion that powerfully exercises the mind, and prevents the reasoning faculty from performing its duty, causes temporary derangement. It is not necessary in order to establish the presence of insanity to prove the person to be labouring under a delusion of intellect—a false creation of the mind. A man may allow his imagination to dwell upon an idea until it acquires an unhealthy ascendancy over the intellect, and in this way a person may commit suicide from an habitual belief in the justifiableness of the act. If a man, by a distorted process of reasoning, argues himself into a conviction of the propriety of adopting a particular course of conduct, without any reference to the necessary result of that

train of thought, it is certainly no evidence of his being in possession of a sound mind. A person may reason himself into a belief that murder, under certain circumstances not authorized by the law, is perfectly just and proper. The circumstance of his allowing his mind to reason on the subject is a *prima facie* case against his sanity; at least it demonstrates a great weakness of the moral constitution. A man's *morale* must be in an imperfect state of development who reasons himself into the conviction that self-murder is under any circumstances justifiable.

We dwell at some length on this subject, because we feel assured that juries do not pay sufficient attention to the influence of passion in overclouding the understanding. If the notion that in every case of suicide the intellectual or moral faculties are perverted, be generally received, it will at once do away with the verdict of *felo-de-se*. Should the jury entertain a doubt as to the presence of derangement, (and such cases may present themselves,) it is their duty, in accordance with the well-known principle of British jurisprudence, to give the person the benefit of that doubt; and thus a verdict of lunacy may be conscientiously returned in every case of this description.

Having, we think, clearly established that no penal law can act beneficially in preventing self-destruction,—first, because it would punish the *innocent* for the crimes of the *guilty*; and, secondly, that, owing to insanity being present in every instance, the person determined on suicide is indifferent as to the consequences of his action,—it becomes our province to consider what are the legitimate means of staying the progress of an offence that undermines the foundation of society and social happiness.

In the prevention of suicide, too much stress cannot be laid on the importance of adopting a well-regulated, enlarged, and philosophic system of education, by which all the *moral* as well as the intellectual faculties will be expanded and disciplined. The education of the intellect without any reference to the moral feelings is a species of instruction calculated to do an immense amount of injury. The tuition that addresses itself exclusively to the perceptive and reflective faculties is not the kind of education that will elevate the moral character of a people. Religion must be made the basis of all secular knowledge. We must be led to believe that the education which fits the possessor for another world is vastly superior to that which has relation only to the concerns of this life. We are no opponents to the diffusion of knowledge; but we are to that description of information which has only reference "to the life that is, and not to that which is to be." Such a system of instruction is of necessity defective, because it is partial in its operation. Teach a man his duty to God, as well as his obligations to his fellow-men; lead him to believe that his life is not his own; that disappointment and misery is the penalty of Adam's transgression, and one from which there is no hope of escaping; and, above all, inculcate a resignation to the decrees of Divine Providence. When life becomes a burden, when the mind is sinking under the weight of accumulated misfortunes, and no gleam of hope penetrates through the vista of futurity to gladden the heart, the intellect says, "Commit suicide, and escape from a world of wretchedness and woe;" the moral principle says, "Live; it is your duty to bear with resignation the afflictions that overwhelm you; let the moral influence of your example be reflected in the characters of those by whom you are surrounded."

If we are justified in maintaining that the majority of the cases of suicide result from a vitiated condition of the moral principle, then it is certainly a legitimate mode of preventing the commission of the offence to elevate the character of man as a moral being. It is no legitimate argument against this position to maintain that insanity in all its phases marches side by

side with civilization and refinement; but it must not be forgotten that a people may be refined and civilized, using these terms in their ordinary signification, who have not a just conception of their duties as members of a Christian community. Let the education of the *heart* go side by side with the education of the *head*; inculcate the ennobling thought, that we live not for ourselves, but for others; that it is an evidence of true Christian courage to face bravely the ills of life, to bear with impunity "the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, and the proud man's contumely;" and we disseminate principles which will give expansion to those faculties that alone can fortify the mind against the commission of a crime alike repugnant to all human and Divine laws.

KARL MARX (1818–1883)

from *Peuchet on Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Born in Trier, Prussia, the third of seven children, Karl Heinrich Marx was educated at home until the age of 13. His father, descended from a long line of rabbis, was prohibited by the Prussian authorities from practicing law as a Jew; he converted to Lutheranism despite his liberal, deistic beliefs. Karl attended the universities of Bonn and Berlin, where his involvement with political thought and activism began early. In 1842, he became the editor of the Rheinische Zeitung, *published in Cologne, but it was suppressed by the government a year later. He spent the next years in exile in Paris, where he wrote for the radical newspaper,* Vorwärts, *and in Brussels. When revolutionary activity broke out in 1848, he returned to Cologne to found the* Neue Rheinische Zeitung; *a year later, it too was suppressed, and he was expelled from Prussia. Marx then moved to London, devoting himself to developing his theory of socialism and to political activity in on behalf of revolution and social reform.*

Marx collaborated with Friedrich Engels in the writing of the short and politically incendiary Communist Manifesto *(1847) and in the extended theoretical work on political economy critiquing capitalism and developing communist economic theory,* Das Kapital *(3 vols., 1867, 1885, 1895), which Engels completed after Marx's death. These works are particularly sensitive to issues of exploitation, which were central in Marx's understanding of not only industrial capitalism and the labor theory of value, but also of suicide, as the selection here makes clear.*

The excerpt is Marx's only published discussion of suicide. It is his translation from the French of a text from Jacques Peuchet (1758–1830; Marx misidentifies Peuchet's birth date as 1760), with interpolations added by Marx to augment the argument Peuchet was making. In the text here, Marx's interpolations appear in boldface in the text; omissions from Peuchet's text are provided in the footnotes. Peuchet, a prolific researcher and writer, and the editor of Dictionnaire Universel de la Géographie Commerçante, *was the archivist of the Paris Police Prefecture, who, Marx tells us in his introduction to Peuchet's text, drafted his memoirs as an old man, using materials from the Paris Police Archives and relying on his lengthy practical experience in police work and administration. With the interpolation of a few deft sentences, Marx transforms Peuchet's already unsettling case histories—like the wedding of*

the daughter of a tailor that ends instead in suicide, or the case of the Creole from Martinique, whose sister-in-law is understood as property—into serious social critique. Marx's translation/essay was published in 1846 in Gesellschaftsspiegel (Mirror of Society)*, a small German socialist journal in which Engels was involved, but it was not mentioned in any of the surviving letters with his colleagues at the time, nor was it reprinted during Marx's lifetime. The original on which it is based, Peuchet's* Memoires tirés des archives de la police (1838)*, is available in a facsimile edition.*

Sources

Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds., *Marx on Suicide*, trs. Eric A. Plaut, Gabrielle Edgcomb, and Kevin Anderson. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999, pp. 45–70. Material in introduction from Kevin Anderson, "Marx on Suicide in the Context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender," ibid., pp. 3–40.

from PEUCHET ON SUICIDE

French critique of society has, at least partly, the great advantage of demonstrating the contradictions and the unnatural state of modern life, not only in the relationship between particular classes, but also in all spheres and forms of current intercourse. . . . I shall use an excerpt about *suicide* from the *Memoirs* drawn from the *Police Archives* by Jacques Peuchet as an example of French critique. At the same time, it may show the extent to which it is the conceit of the benevolent bourgeoisie that the only issues are providing some bread and some education to the proletariat, as if only the workers suffer from present social conditions, but that, in general, this is the best of all possible worlds.

With Jacques Peuchet, as with many older French practitioners (now mostly deceased) who lived through the numerous upheavals since 1789—the numerous deceptions, enthusiasms, constitutions, rulers, defeats, and victories—there appeared a critique of the existing property, family, and other private relationships (in a word, of private life) as the necessary consequence of their political experiences. . . .

. . . Listen then to our archivist of the Paris Police Prefecture on the subject of *suicide:*

The yearly toll of suicides, which is to some extent normal and periodic, has to be viewed as a symptom of the deficient organization of our society. For, in times of industrial stagnation and its crises, in times of high food prices and hard winters, this symptom always becomes more prominent and takes on an epidemic character. At these times, prostitution and theft increase proportionately. Although penury is the greatest source of suicide, we find it in all classes, among the idle rich, as well as among artists and politicians. The varieties of reasons motivating suicide make a mockery of the moralists' single-minded and uncharitable blaming. . . .

. . . All that has been said against suicide stems from the same circle of ideas. **One condemns suicide with foregone conclusions. But, the very existence of suicide is an open protest against these unsophisticated conclusions.** They speak of our duty to this society, but not of our right to expect explanations and actions by our society. They endlessly exalt, as the

infinitely higher virtue, overcoming suffering, rather than giving in to it. Such a virtue is every bit as sad as the perspective it opens up. In brief, one has made suicide an act of cowardice, a crime against law, **society**, and honor.

How is it that people commit suicide, despite such great anathema against it? The blood of the despairing does not flow through the same arteries as that of those cold beings who have the leisure to debate such fruitless questions. *Man is a mystery to man; one knows only how to blame him, but does not know him*. Has one noticed how mindless the institutions are under whose rule Europe lives? . . .

It has been believed that suicide could be prevented by abusive punishments and by branding with infamy the memory of the guilty one. What can one say about the indignity of such branding, hurled at people who are no longer there to plead their case? The unfortunate rarely bother themselves with all this. And, if the act of suicide accuses someone, it is usually those remaining behind, because in this crowd there was not one person for whom it was worth staying alive. Have the childish and cruel means, that have been devised, successfully fought against the whisperings of despair? To one who wishes to flee this world, how do the insults that the world promises to heap on his corpse matter? *He sees therein only another act of cowardice on the part of the living. In fact, what kind of society is it wherein one finds the most profound loneliness in the midst of many millions of people, a society where one can be overwhelmed by an uncontrollable urge to kill oneself without anyone of us suspecting it? This society is no society, but, as Rousseau said, a desert populated by wild animals.* In the positions in police administration that I have held, suicides were part of my responsibilities. I wanted to find out if, among the determining causes, one might find some whose consequences could prove to be prevented. I undertook a comprehensive study of this subject. **I found that, short of a total reform of the organization of our current society, all other attempts would be in vain.** Among the sources for the despair that leads easily excitable people, passionate beings with deep feelings, to seek death, I found the primary cause was the bad treatment, the injustices, the secret punishments that these people received at the hands of harsh parents and superiors, upon whom they were dependent. *The revolution did not topple all tyrannies. The evil which one blames on arbitrary forces exists in families, where it causes crises, analogous to those of revolutions. . . .*

. . . One could compile a strange collection of quotations from famous authors and poets which the despairing have written, preparing for their death with a certain splendor. During the moment of wonderful cold-bloodedness that comes with the decision to die, breathes a kind of contagious inspiration that flows from these souls onto these pages, even among those classes who were deprived of education. As they gather themselves together before the sacrifice, whose depths they have plumbed, they summon up all their powers and, with characteristic, warm expression, bleed to death.

Some of these poems, now buried in the archives, are masterpieces. A dull bourgeois, who places his soul in his business and his God in commerce, can find all this to be very romantic and refute the pain that he cannot understand with derisive laughter. We are not surprised by his derision. **What else to expect from three-percenters, who have no inkling that daily, hourly, bit by bit, they kill themselves, their human nature.** But, what is one to say of those good people who play the devout, **the educated,** and still repeat this nastiness?

Undoubtedly, it is of great importance that the poor devils endure life, if only in the interest of the privileged classes of this world who would be ruined by the large scale suicide of this

rabble. But, is there no other way to make the existence of this class bearable besides insult, derisive laughter, and beautiful words? Above all, there must exist a kind of greatness of soul in these beggars who, fixed on death as they are, destroy themselves rather than choosing the detour of the scaffold on the way to suicide. It is true that **the more progress our economy makes,** the more rarely do these noble suicides occur, and conscious hostility takes its place and the unfortunate recklessly chance robbery and murder. It is easier to get the death penalty than to get work. . . .

. . . The classification of the different causes of suicide would be the *classification of the failures of our society itself.* One has killed oneself because some schemer stole one's invention, on which occasion the inventor plunged into the most awful misery due to the long, learned investigation to which he had to submit, without even being able to buy a legal brief. One has killed oneself to avoid the enormous cost and the demeaning persecution in financial difficulties, which have become so common, by the way, that those men mandated to administer the public weal pay no attention whatsoever. One has killed oneself because one cannot find work, after having groaned for a long time under the insults and the stinginess of those among us who are the arbitrary distributors of work.

. . . One sees that, for want of anything better, suicide becomes the most extreme refuge from the evils of private life.

Among the causes of suicide I very frequently found dismissal from office, refusal of work, and a sudden drop in income, in consequence of which these families could no longer obtain the necessities of life, all the more so since most of them lived from hand to mouth. . . .

. . . Sad help, without doubt, after such a loss! But, how should one family aid all the unfortunates since, when all is said and done, all France as it currently is, could not nourish them. The charity of the rich would not suffice even if our whole nation were religious, which it is far from being. **Suicide reduces the most violent share of the difficulty, the scaffold the rest. Only by completely recasting our entire system of agriculture and industry can sources of income and true wealth be anticipated.** It is easy to proclaim constitutions on parchment guaranteeing every citizen's right to education, to work, and, above all, to a minimum subsistence-level existence. But it is not enough to put these magnanimous wishes on paper; there remains the essential task of bringing these liberal ideas to fruition through material and intelligent **social** institutions.

The ancient world of paganism brought splendid creations to this earth; will modern freedom be left behind by her rivals? Who will join together these grandiose elements of power?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (1820–1910)

from *Note, Christmas Eve, 1850*
from *Nightingale's draft novel*
from *Draft for* Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth *(1860)*
from *Notes on Nursing for the Labouring Classes (1861)*
from *Note to Benjamin Jowett (c. 1866)*
Reflections on George MacDonald's Novel, Robert Falconer *(1868)* (in Archive only)
Truth and Feeling (1871 or later)
from *Notes on Egypt: Mysticism and Eastern Religions*

Florence Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy (hence her name), but raised by her wealthy family in England, educated primarily by her father. As a member of the upper class, she was expected to marry, to visit, and to entertain. She detested the prospect of this enforced, purposeless idleness, and throughout her 20s, she suffered frustration and depression. At age 16, she experienced a "call to service," but her family refused to allow her to become a nurse, an unthinkable life for a lady, involving as it would exposure to disease, dirt, and violations of Victorian modesty concerning the human body; nurses were notorious for drinking on the job, demanding bribes, and being sexually available, if not actually prostitutes. It was not until she was 33 that she was finally able to practice nursing, as superintendent of an institution for gentlewomen.

In November 1854, during the Crimean War 4, Nightingale led 38 British women, the first to nurse in war, to Scutari (now known as Üsküdar, Turkey). The Barrack Hospital to which they were sent was merely a converted Turkish barrack, lacking in running water, functioning toilets, beds, bedding and laundry facilities. She worked assiduously to improve conditions. Its high death rates were brought down, but not until the arrival of the Sanitary Commission, which made the necessary structural repairs. Nightingale learned the lessons of infectious disease in the process. She returned to England a heroine, although seriously ill. She used a fund of about £50,000 fund raised in her honor at the end of the war to found the first secular training school for nurses. After the war, her chief collaborator was the head of the Sanitary Commission, with whom she had worked to bring down death rates at the Barrack Hospital. For most of her long life, she did research and wrote from her London home, meeting with officials and experts there. An expert methodologist, she was the first woman fellow of the Royal Statistical Society. She did substantial research for two royal commissions, on the Crimean War and on India, both situations with high rates of preventable mortality. She gave some 40 years of work to improving health care and preventing famine in India. At home, she did much to bring professional nursing into the dreaded workhouses. She was the first woman to receive the Order of Merit (1907).

For Nightingale, nursing was part of a broader approach to public health care, emphasizing prevention, health promotion, and hospital reform. Her work was grounded in a strong Christian faith, rather heterodox and liberal, drawing on sources well beyond her own Church of England. Reforms could be achieved by learning God's laws, she believed, which required rigorous research and careful ongoing monitoring; in this way, people could become God's "coworkers" in the betterment of the world.

Nightingale's concern with suicide was both personal and professional. The early selections here, including a diary note dated Christmas Eve, 1850, exhibit her anguish over the choices she faced: whether to marry a man she loved, her long-time suitor Richard Monckton Milnes (knowing that marriage at that time would mean a life of domestic seclusion), or to reject the proposal in favor of a meaningful career (a barely tenable choice for someone of her societal position). Nightingale desperately wanted to work; to marry and thus foreclose this possibility, she said, "would seem like suicide."

Nightingale made use of the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet's (1796–1874) work on suicide in Sur l'Homme et le developpement de ses facultés, ou Essai de Physique Sociale *(1835)* (Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties)*, which, much like the work of Durkheim [q.v.] over half a century later, used statistical methods in regarding suicide as something to be studied like other demographic phenomena. As Nightingale notes in* Suggestions for Thought*, this is not to assume that suicide is predetermined or "caused" by statistical laws.*

While Nightingale generally regarded suicide as wrong, she regarded as an even greater wrong the administrative slackness and incompetence of many institutions, including hospitals and war agencies, which cost so many lives. Nightingale's overall response to suicide or suicide attempts was to encourage compassionate rather than punitive treatment as a felony offense, in both her notes on George MacDonald's serial novel Robert Falconer *(3 vols., 1868) and in her insistence on the importance of care to prevent suicide and reform in hospital conditions, especially the understaffing of nurses. She also recommended that a column for "suicide" be added in the Army medical returns.*

Sources

Selections from *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. Diary entries, 1850, from Vol. 2, *Florence Nightingale's Spiritual Journey: Biblical Annotations, Sermons and Journal Notes*, ed. Lynn McDonald, 2001, pp. 383–384; passage from a draft novel and a fictional dialogue for *Suggestions for Thought* from Vol. 8, "Notes on Nursing for the Labouring Classes (1861)," in *Public Health Care* 6:67. Note to Benjamin Jowett, add. ms. 45783 f86; "Reflections on George MacDonald's novel Robert Falconer," from Vol. 3, *Florence Nightingale's Theology: Essays, Letters and Journal Notes*, ed. Lynn McDonald, 2002, pp. 631–632; "Truth and Feeling," *Theology* 3:169; "Notes on Egypt," *Mysticism and Eastern Religions* 4:285, n. 298. Material in introduction contributed by Lynn McDonald.

from NOTE, CHRISTMAS EVE, 1850

In my thirty-first year, I can see nothing desirable but death. Entire change of air. Lord, Thou knowest my heart; I cannot understand it. I am ashamed to understand it. I know that if I were to see him [her suitor Richard Monckton Milnes] again, the very thought of doing so quite overcomes me. I know that, since I refused him, not one day has passed without my thinking of him, that life is desolate to me to the last degree without his sympathy. Yet, do I wish to marry him? I know that I could not bear his life, that to be nailed to a continuation and exaggeration of my present life without hope of another would be intolerable to me, that voluntarily to put it out of

my power, ever to be able to seize the chance of forming for myself a true and rich life would seem to me like suicide. And yet my present life is suicide. . . .

from NIGHTINGALE'S DRAFT NOVEL

Many are only deterred from suicide because it is more than anything else to say to God I will not—I will not do as Thou wouldst have me, and because it is no use.

from DRAFT FOR SUGGESTIONS FOR THOUGHT TO SEARCHERS AFTER RELIGIOUS TRUTH AMONG THE ARTIZANS OF ENGLAND (1860)

But between God and man there is no such agreement. Man did not ask to be born. God never asked man whether he would undertake the charge of himself or not. Many a one, if so asked, would certainly say, No, I cannot undertake this anxious existence, not even in view of the ultimate happiness secured to me. But He is too good a Father to put it into His children's power to refuse it. If He were to do this, timid spirits would all resign at once. According to the theory of responsibility, suicide would be justified. For a man may put an end to his service, if dissatisfied with it. . . .

. . . So Quetelet makes his computations that so many people will commit suicide, that so many widowers will marry three times; and we call it, and justly (supposing the computation correct), a law, and then, with our vague ideas that a law is a coercive force, we cry, "Oh! how horrid—then there is a law which compels so many people to commit suicide in a twelvemonth." But the law, which is merely a statistical table, has no power to make people commit suicide. So you might as well say that Newton's law has the power to make the stone fall as Quetelet's table to make the people commit suicide. Newton's law is nothing but the statistics of gravitation, it has no power whatever.

from NOTES ON NURSING FOR THE LABOURING CLASSES (1861)

The simple precaution of removing cords by which a patient can hang himself, razors by which he can cut his throat, out of his way, when inclined to do such things, is much neglected especially in private nursing. Many inquests upon suicides show this, and the friends are invariably absolved by the verdict!!

If you look into the reports of trials or accidents, and especially of suicides, or into the medical history of fatal cases, it is almost incredible how often the whole thing turns upon something which has happened because "he," or still oftener "she," "was not there." But it is

still more incredible how often, how almost always, this is accepted as a sufficient reason, a justification; why, the very fact of the thing having happened is the proof of its not being a justification.

from NOTE TO BENJAMIN JOWETT (c. 1866)

Now certainly the poor man who embezzles his employers' money, knowing it to be wrong, and goes and commits suicide, is much better, in a much more hopeful state than these most respectable people, who are willfully stupid, who cannot be saved, who commit the sin against the Holy Ghost every day, who commit and permit all kinds of atrocities (and report and write and write and report) not knowing them to be so. . . .

. . . But I don't see that people have in the least gone on to discover and apply the laws by which there shall be no more, e.g., suicides, idiots, lunatics, tho' we have discovered (but not applied) the laws by which there shall be no more cholera. (We do not say now, what a mystery it is that God should permit that dreadful plague, cholera.)

from TRUTH AND FEELING (unpublished essay, 1871 or later)

Those who talk sententiously (to the suicide) of the wrong done to a society which has done next to nothing for him . . . I should say to him: "*God liveth: thou art not thine own but his. Bear thy hunger, thy horror in His name*. I in His name will help thee out of them, as I may. *To go before He calleth thee is to say 'Thou forgettest'* unto Him who numbereth the hairs of thy head, such a loving and tender one who, *for the sake of a good with which thou wilt be all content, and without which thou never couldst be content, permits thee there to stand—for a time*—long to His sympathizing as well as to thy suffering heart."

Free will and necessity, regarded as they usually are, namely, as mutually exclusive theories, are doubtless little or no better than mere words. Is there not a higher point of view from which they may be seen to be partial or relative truths, false when separated, true when combined, like the two pictures in a stereoscope? Look at ourselves from our own side alone, as beings having no reference to God (and this is I am afraid what the respondent's "matter of experience" comes to) we are free at all events to will. Look at ourselves from the side of an omniscient, omnipotent Being, as an opposite class of people do, (this really means think of God as omniscient, omnipotent and omni-one or two other things only, but devoid of all sense of that relationship between Himself and us, which when viewed from our side we call duty) and we can see no more room for man's will now than for God's will before. Rise above all this alternation and strife. It is a fancied freedom which the will exercises in opposition to God's laws, for God's laws are our

laws, they are the laws of our own nature, essence and condition. It is a fancied necessity which constrains men to act, except in self-deterioration and destruction, according to God's will. We are all free (as it is called) to commit suicide or murder, but our free will wills that we should not commit it.

from NOTES ON EGYPT: MYSTICISM AND EASTERN RELIGIONS

That Ergamenes, a king of Ethiopia, was a funny fellow. He was the first to abolish suicide: according to Wilkinson [*Manners and Customs* 1:307], it had hitherto been the custom for the Ethiopian kings to receive word from the priests when the gods desired their presence, to which summons the kings immediately attended. But Wilkinson confines this custom to the Ethiopians, whereas the great Rameses himself committed suicide, not, as it seems, from any disgust of life as "in the high Roman fashion" nor from vanity which the oftenest prompts it now, nor was it considered any extraordinary event, but simply from impatience to enjoy the society of the gods and the rewards held out to men who love them. I confess, to me it seems more extraordinary it does not happen oftener than that it happens so often. It seems so natural to me that, if we really believed what we say, that the child should hasten into the presence of the Father whom it really loves, and by whom it believes itself to be loved, in a childish impatience, not waiting for the bell to ring or for the Father to want it. It seems to me a later and more perfect development of the human understanding than we usually see, to perceive that the Father is everywhere, that we shall not be really nearer Him in another state than in this, that nearness is not in place but in the state of spirit and that the submissive mind, which seeks only to be one with the Father's will and sees that will in its circumstances, is really nearest to the Father's presence.

OCEANIA INDIGENOUS CULTURES (documented 1820–1984)

Selections extended in the Digital Archive or that appear in their entirety in the Archive may be accessed through this single QR code.

MELANESIA

Fiji

#1. The Principal Wife of the Chief
(William Mariner, 1820)

#2. Elderly Parents and the Time to Die (expanded in Archive)
(Charles Wilkes, 1845)

#3. Deaths of the Old Chief and his Wives
(Thomas Williams, 1858)

Solomon Islands

#4. Tikopian Attitudes Towards Suicide
(Raymond Firth, 1967)

Papua New Guinea: Kiriwina, The Trobriand Islands

#5. Suicide as an Act of Justice; Expiation and Insult: Jumping from a Palm
(Bronislaw Malinowski, 1916, 1926)

#6. The Kaliai: Good Death, Bad Death (expanded in Archive)
(David R. Counts and Dorothy Ayers Counts, 1983–84)

MICRONESIA

Guam

#7. A Tale of Two Lovers: Tying Their Hair Together
(Louis de Freycinet, 1819)

Chuuk

#8. Sea Spirit Spasms (in Archive only)
(Frank Joseph Mahony, 1950–68, 1970)

#9. Group Rejection and Suicide (in Archive only)
(Thomas Gladwin and Seymour Bernard Sarason, 1953)

POLYNESIA

Samoa

#10. Who Will Go With Me?
(George Turner, 1884)

Tonga

#11. The Love-Sick of Vavau (in Archive only)
(Basil Thomson, 1886–91, 1894)

Niue Island

#12. Traditions of Niue (in Archive only)
(Edwin M. Loeb, 1926)

Pukapuka, Cook Islands

#13. After Defeat in Fighting: Burying Oneself Alive (expanded in Archive)
(Ernest Beaglehole and Pearl Beaglehole, 1938)

Marquesas

#14. Coconut Rites for Suicide (in Archive only)
Tahia-noho-uu
(E. S. Craighill Handy, 1920–21, 1923, 1930)

Mangareva, Gambier Islands

#15. Cliff Suicide: The Privilege of Women (expanded in Archive)
(Te Rangi Hiroa [Sir Peter H. Buck], 1938)

NEW ZEALAND

#16. The Maori Myth of Tane and The Myth of Rakuru (in Archive only)
(John White, 1887)

#17. Maori: Tupu and Mate (expanded in Archive)
(J. Prtyz Johansen, 1954)

#18. The Spirit (in Archive only)

#19 The Dying Maori Chief and his Old and Young Wives
(Frederick Edward Maning, 1922)

HAWAII

#20. The Secrecy of the Bones of a Chief
(Laura C. Green and Martha Warren Beckwith, 1926)

Oceania, or the Pacific Islands, includes several thousand open-water islands in the Pacific Ocean. Oceania is traditionally grouped by the three principal regional categories of Melanesia (New Guinea and the islands northeast of Australia), Polynesia (the central and southeast Pacific including New Zealand and Hawaii), and Micronesia (north of Melanesia and west of Polynesia); Australia is occasionally included as a fourth zone. Of the three regions, Polynesia was colonized the most recently by Austronesian-speaking peoples and is the most culturally and linguistically homogenous; Micronesia and Melanesia include peoples with a wider diversity of cultural traditions in origin and antiquity, and are regarded by some scholars as primarily geographic regions rather than cultural zones. In New Guinea alone, some 800 languages are spoken. Both the land area and the population of Oceania are small, though the dispersal over the globe is huge: the total area of Oceania including Australia is more than three million square miles.

The first of many waves of human migration out of Asia to the Pacific Islands began in northern Melanesia at least 40,000 years ago. The migration of Austronesian-speaking peoples out of Taiwan and southern China began perhaps 6,000 to 8,000 years ago; modern Polynesians developed out of settlers in the Samoa-Tonga-Fiji triangle around 2,000 years ago. They moved southward and eastward, and north to Hawaii, traveling by boat and outrigger canoe and eventually inhabiting the major islands of the South Pacific by 750 A.D.

Before European contact (1521–1800 A.D.), Pacific Islanders lived in societies ranging from small communities on atolls to large, highly hierarchical chiefdoms on the larger islands. With many terrestrial animal and bird species soon eaten to extinction and the natural landscape of most islands largely free of edible plants, the islands that would support societies large or small had to be groomed to support human life; forests were initially cleared through shifting agriculture, and the island ecologies and landscapes were dramatically altered over successive generations for human cultivation. Regional trade was conducted extensively among the islands in specialized networks. Despite the progress made in agricultural technology throughout Oceania, disease, especially malaria, is thought to have been the cause of the very low population growth of Near Oceania (western Melanesia), with the exception of the New Guinea highlands, in contrast to Remote Oceania (Micronesia and the regions east of the Solomon Islands that were all colonized in a post-1200 B.C. expansion), which was relatively free of disease in comparison and much more densely populated at the time of European contact.

By the end of the 18th century, Europeans had explored most of the Pacific Islands and established a strong economic and political presence in the region with the effect of native decimation, largely through the introduction of disease; throughout the 19th century, Oceania was widely colonized by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States. European religious groups, especially Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists, mounted substantial missionary efforts, and by 1890, most of the indigenous inhabitants of Oceania had been at least nominally converted.

The Selections

As with other oral cultures, views of the ethics of suicide among Oceanic cultures must be extrapolated from reports of cultural practices, anecdotes, sayings, and other material from Western observers, keeping in mind that both the antecedent convictions of these observers may have distorted what they saw and that the overlay of Western religion and political organization may have already influenced native attitudes by the time they were reported. The ethnographic reports of early explorers and missionaries are often presented with undisguised editorial comment, as, for example, in George Turner's 1884 account (selection #10, "Who Will Go With Me?") that attributes a *sati*-like practice in Samoa to "the downward tendency of heathenism," and Thomas Williams's account (selection #3) in the same year of voluntary regicide and uxoricide in Fiji as evidence of "the tyranny exercised by the devil over those who were so entirely under his control."

Oceanic cultures exhibit many examples of institutionalized suicide that carry with them a strong social element. Charles Wilkes, recounting his observations of Fiji in 1840 in a narrative of his voyages published in 1845 (selection #2, "Elderly Parents and the Time to Die"), describes the suicides of unhappily betrothed young women and occasions of voluntary senicide. Aged parents, he observes, felt a sense of duty to have themselves killed at the appropriate time. Some elements of the customs Wilkes describes appear to involve voluntary choice: the parent informs his or her children when the time to die has come, not the other way around, and the parent is allowed to choose the manner of death (strangulation or burial alive) and the place where the grave is to be dug. That the parent is subject to such expectations, however, marks this variant of suicide as institutionalized and in this sense less than fully voluntary: it is what old people are *supposed to do*. This social expectation of voluntary senicide is found in many areas of the Pacific Islands, including the Maori cultures of New Zealand.

The voluntary or consensual death of widows at or around the time of their husband's funeral—much like *sati* practices in India—was also found in Oceanic cultures, particularly among the Fijians, though it was generally restricted to rituals marking the death of chiefs, and thus an uncommon but socially important occurrence that served to heighten the expression of elevated status. Sometimes the widow begged to be strangled and buried with her deceased husband; at other times, the widow went to her grave with much less enthusiasm, though a surviving widow would be certain to face an unfortunate life of insult and discrimination, particularly since her refusal to accept death would be seen as an act of disrespect to her late husband, family, and friends. Both William Mariner's 1820 report, "The Principal Wife of the Chief" (selection #1), and Thomas Williams's "Deaths of the Old Chief and his Wives," based on his observations between 1840–53 (selection #3, expanded in the Archive), reflect the entrenched status of voluntary and consensual uxoricide in Fiji culture, but also describe institutional suicide practices

involving regicide: it is the old king who is to die, and with him, his favorite wives. In Hawaii and many other places, servants were also sometimes killed voluntarily upon the death of their master. Similar and related forms of institutional suicide are reported in Turner's account of Samoa and also in Green and Beckwith's Hawaiian account (selection #20), "The Secrecy of the Bones of a Chief," of two men, designated the *kahu* and the *moe puu*, who are entrusted with placing the bones of a deceased chief in a hidden cave, knowing they will pay for their crucial role in maintaining the secrecy of the location with their own lives.

Observers in Tikopian culture (e.g., Raymond Firth) also document the occurrence of certain "suicidal adventures," particularly those of young men sailing alone far out to sea toward other lands—risky undertakings that often ended in death. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the voyage, some such adventures are seen as suicide attempts, while others are not (selection #4). Indeed, suicide practices in the Pacific Islands often exhibit the sharp gender differentiation characteristic of many forms of institutionalized or semi-institutionalized suicide. As in Firth's account of Tikopia, suicide by drowning in the ocean is sharply differentiated by gender: females swim out to sea; males take a canoe. In the Polynesian culture of Mangareva, described by Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) in 1938 (selection #15), the "privilege" of committing suicide by jumping off a cliff was reserved for women (men were expected to jump from coconut trees), and they were also segregated by social rank. One part of the cliff was reserved for women of high social rank, another for commoners.

Institutional suicide practices often involve not only gender differentiation, but a highly structured pattern for performance of the act. In Malinowski's famous 1926 account of Kima'i's suicide in Papua New Guinea's Kiriwina Islands (formerly known as the Trobriand Islands) (selection #5, "Suicide as an Act of Justice; Expiation and Insult: Jumping from a Palm"), a characteristic suicide pattern is exhibited: the individual dons festive attire, climbs a tall palm tree, and announces his or her suicidal intention and the reasons for it (typically, the shame or insult that has been incurred) before jumping off. The pattern is well understood by both the person committing suicide and those watching from below; Malinowski comments on the social role such suicides play. Among the Kaliai of New Guinea, contemporary observations (selection #6, Counts and Ayers's "The Kaliai: Good Death, Bad Death," expanded in the Archive) examine the social roles of suicide and identify the rules—received in oral tradition, known to members of the community, and operative in practice—concerning the way in which a person should kill himself or herself. Other accounts of institutionalized suicide in Polynesia include a report from Pukapuka in the Cook Islands, "After Defeat in Fighting" (selection #13), that losers in warfare committed suicide by burying themselves alive.

In Micronesian folklore, probably the most famous of all stories is the Two Lovers Leap story, a kind of Romeo and Juliet story though without the mistaken assumptions about each others deaths found in Shakespeare. This tale does not appear to have institutionalized features suggesting that the dual suicide is controlled by social expectations; it more closely resembles a common tale of young lovers thwarted by social practices. The cliff from which the lovers leapt is now one of Guam's most famous tourist destinations. Another famous spot, Suicide Cliff in Saipan, honors the spot where, in the waning days of World War II, Japanese families—told that the invading Americans were particularly bloodthirsty—would line up to plunge over the cliffs.

Particularly in Polynesian cultures, anger may play a significant role in suicide. Even today, according to Don Rubinstein, suicide is characteristically triggered by a perceived rejection from a close relative; killing oneself is the expression of loss at a ruptured relationship, rather than a response to anger per se. Edwin Loeb, writing in 1926, "Traditions of Niue" (selection #12),

says that suicide occurred "upon slight provocation." Shame, jealousy, frustration, aggrievement, and many other emotional responses to specific situations might play a role, though anger is described as principal among them.

Suicide also played a role in the mythological and ritualistic character of some Oceanic cultures. In a Maori origin legend called the Myth of Tane, retold by John White (selection #16), the daughter of the god Tane, Hine-i-tauira (meaning "model daughter"), kills herself after learning of her own incestuous relationship with her father. After this act, her name is changed to "daughter of defiance" and in the world of spirits and darkness where she comes to reside, she is known as "great daughter of darkness." In another Maori legend recounted by White, available in the Digital Archive, the first thief, Rakuru, steals a magic fish-hook; he too commits suicide out of shame when his theft is discovered (selection #16, in the Archive).

Among Pacific Islanders and in other oral cultures, some deaths defy Western classification as homicide or suicide. As in Fiji, the voluntary or consensual killing of widows is such an instance; while suicide itself is frowned upon and those who commit it are believed to be isolated in the next world, the voluntary funeral death of widows is encouraged. Many observers have explored connections between Pacific Islanders' attitudes toward death in general and various suicidal practices. Among the inhabitants of the Solomon Islands, for example, the overarching attitude toward death is said by Raymond Firth to be regret rather than fear: to commit suicide is to actualize an already inevitable end (selection #4). The contemporary analysis pursued in "The Kaliai: Good Death, Bad Death" (selection #6) attempts to identify what distinguishes between "good" and "bad" deaths in another Melanesian culture; the key, apparently, is whether it does or does not cause social disruption. In most traditional Oceanic cultures, there do not appear to be conceptions of an afterlife punishment for suicide, as distinct from isolation, although Handy (selection #14) reports that Marquesan women who killed themselves out of jealousy were believed to be able to return as malevolent spirits to haunt their husbands and their husbands' lovers. In the Marquesan myth that Handy records, a young woman commits suicide out of loneliness when her husband is away; performance of a ritual is able to bring her back to her husband and children, but only as a spirit, and she is able to stay with them only until her oldest child is grown.

Finally, overall worldviews may affect the ethics of suicide as well. Among the indigenous Maori population of New Zealand, Johansen (selection #17) shows how cultural conceptions of psychology and religion play into the concept of suicide. The Maori see themselves in a world that swings between periods of growth, called *tupu*, and periods of weakening or decay, called *mate*. According to Johansen, the Maori see their world holistically: a weakening in the emotional or spiritual life will also include a diminishment in the physical dimensions (e.g., health may be lost). *Mate*, which is often caused by insult or shame, often causes a flight from life and society. Suicide is the extreme form of flight and is thus related to the concept of weakening. In the Niue language, as "Traditions of Niue" (selection #12) points out, *mate* is the word for death itself. Indeed, *mate* and cognate forms mean dead/death throughout Oceanic languages generally.

No comprehensive account for all Pacific Island cultures can be provided for the significance of death, the meaning of life, the relationship between the individual and society, or many other matters of background culture relevant to the ethics of suicide, so varied are these cultures. Furthermore, the earliest available accounts, including those provided here, are filtered through a European mindset and a constellation of biases clearly hostile to the practices they report; it cannot be assumed that the descriptions, perceptions, and

sentiments are fully authentic. Under the broad influence of Christianity in the Pacific today, many people now regard suicide as sinful and believe that there is an afterlife punishment for it; but it is clear that certain forms of institutionalized suicide and suicidal responses to interpersonal reactions have been widespread in the past and were an apparently "normal" part of these cultures.

MELANESIA

FIJI

[#1] The Principal Wife of the Chief (William Mariner, 1820)

A man may have several wives; but the greatest chief, that is, she who is of the best family, is the principal wife; and in respect to her,—if her husband die first, she must be strangled on the day of his death, and afterwards buried with him . . . [T]here was a certain chief, a native of Fiji, who about that period fell ill and died: his wife, who was also a native of Fiji, in accordance with the religious notions in which she was brought up, considered it a breach of duty to outlive him; she therefore desired to be strangled. All her Tonga friends endeavored to dissuade her from what appeared to them so unnecessary and useless an act; but no! she was determined, she said, to fulfill her duty, in defect of which she should never be happy in her mind,—the hotooas of Fiji would punish her; and thus; by living, she should only incur fresh miseries. Her friends, finding all remonstrances in vain, allowed her to do as she pleased: she accordingly laid herself down on the ground, by the side of her deceased husband, with her face upwards; and desiring a couple of Fiji men to perform their duty, they put a band of gnatoo round her neck, and pulling at each end, soon ended her existence. In the evening they were buried together in the same grave, in a sitting posture, according to the Fiji custom.

Source

[#1] William Mariner, "The Principal Wife of the Chief," *An Account of the natives of the Tonga Islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Compiled and arranged from the extensive communications of Mr. William Mariner, several years resident in those islands*. By John Martin (Boston: Charles Ewer, 1820), p. 295.

[#2] Elderly Parents and the Time to Die (expanded in Archive) (Charles Wilkes, 1845)

. . . The only general fact to be derived from the various opinions in relation to the spirits of the dead, which have been stated in the way we received them, is, that a belief in a future state is universally entertained by the Feejeeans. . . .

This belief in a future state, guided by no just notions of religious or moral obligation, is the source of many abhorrent practices. Among these are the custom of putting their parents to death when they are advanced in years; suicide; the immolation of wives at the funeral of their husbands, and human sacrifices.

It is among the most usual occurrences, that a father or a mother will notify their children that it is time for them to die, or that a son shall give notice to his parents that they are becoming a burden to him. In either case, the relatives and friends are collected, and informed of the fact. A consultation is then held, which generally results in the conclusion, that the request is to be complied with, in which case they fix upon a day for the purpose, unless it should be done by the party whose fate is under deliberation. The day is usually chosen at a time when yams or taro are ripe, in order to furnish materials for a great feast, called mburua. The aged person is then asked, whether he will prefer to be strangled before his burial or buried alive. When the appointed day arrives, the relatives and friends bring tapas, mats, and oil, as presents. They are received as at other funeral feasts, and all mourn together until the time for the ceremony arrives. The aged person then proceeds to point out the place where the grave is to be dug; and while some are digging it, the others put on a new maro and turbans. When the grave is dug, which is about four feet deep, the person is assisted into it, while the relatives and friends begin their lamentations, and proceed to weep and cut themselves as they do at other funerals. All then proceed to take a parting kiss, after which the living body is covered up, first with mats and tapa wrapped around the head, and then with sticks and earth, which are trodden down. When this has been done, all retire, and are tabooed, as will be stated in describing their ordinary funerals. The succeeding night, the son goes privately to the grave, and lays upon it a piece of ava-root, which is called the vei-tala or farewell.

Mr. Hunt, one of the missionaries, had been a witness of several of these acts. On one occasion, he was called upon by a young man, who desired that he would pray to his spirit for his mother, who was dead. Mr. Hunt was at first in hopes that this would afford him an opportunity of forwarding their great cause. On inquiry, the young man told him that his brothers and himself were just going to bury her. Mr. Hunt accompanied the young man, telling him he would follow in the procession, and do as he desired him, supposing, of course, the corpse would be brought along; but he now met the procession, when the young man said that this was the funeral, and pointed out his mother, who was walking along with them, as gay and lively as any of those present, and apparently as much pleased. Mr. Hunt expressed his surprise to the young man, and asked how he could deceive him so much by saying his mother was dead, when she was alive and well.

He said, in reply, that they had made her death feast, and were now going to bury her; that she was old; that his brother and himself had thought she had lived long enough, and it was time to bury her, to which she had willingly assented, and they were about it now. He had come to Mr. Hunt to ask his prayers, as they did those of the priest. He added, that it was from love of his mother that they had done so; that, in consequence of the same love, they were now going to bury her, and that none but themselves could or ought to do so sacred an office! Mr. Hunt did all in his power to prevent so diabolical an act; but the only reply he received was, that she was their mother, and they were her children, and they ought to put her to death. On reaching the grave, the mother sat down, when they all, including children, grandchildren, relations, and friends, took an affectionate leave of her; a rope, made of twisted tapa, was then passed twice around her neck by her sons, who took hold

of it, and strangled her; after which she was put into her grave, with the usual ceremonies. They returned to feast and mourn, after which she was entirely forgotten as though she had never existed.

Mr. Hunt, after giving me this anecdote, surprised me by expressing his opinion that Feejeeans were a kind and affectionate people to their parents, adding, that he was assured by many of them that they considered this custom as so great a proof of affection that none but children could be found to perform it. The same opinion was expressed by all the other white residents.

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Self-immolation is by no means rare, and they believe that as they leave this life, so will they remain ever after. This forms a powerful motive to escape from decrepitude, or from a crippled condition, by a voluntary death.

Wives are often strangled, or buried alive, at the funeral of their husbands, and generally at their own insistence. Cases of this sort have frequently been witnessed by the white residents. On one occasion Whippy drove away the murderers, rescued the woman, and carried her to his own house, where she was resuscitated. So far, however, from feeling grateful for her preservation, she loaded him with abuse, and ever afterwards manifested the most deadly hatred towards him. That women should desire to accompany their husbands in death, is by no means strange, when it is considered that it is one of the articles of their belief, that in this way alone can they reach the realms of bliss, and she who meets her death with the greatest devotedness, will become the favourite wife in the abode of spirits.

The sacrifice is not, however, always voluntary; but, when a woman refuses to be strangled, her relations often compel her to submit. This they do from interested motives; for, by her death, her connexions become entitled to the property of her husband. Even a delay is made a matter of reproach. Thus, at the funeral of the late king, Ulivou, which was witnessed by Mr. Cargill, his five wives and a daughter were strangled. The principal wife delayed the ceremony, by taking leave of those around her; whereupon Tanoa, the present king, chid her. The victim was his own aunt, and he assisted in putting the rope around her neck, and strangling her, a service he is said to have rendered on a former occasion, to his own mother.

Not only do many of the natives desire their friends to put them to death to escape decrepitude, or immolate themselves with a similar view, but families have such a repugnance to having deformed or maimed persons among them, that those who have met with such misfortunes, are almost always destroyed. An instance of this sort was related to me, when a boy whose leg had been bitten off by a shark was strangled, although he had been taken care of by one of the white residents, and there was every prospect of his recovery. No other reason was given by the perpetrators of the deed; than that if he had lived he would have been a disgrace to his family, in consequence of his having only one leg.

When a native, whether man, woman, or child, is sick of a lingering disease, their relatives will either wring their heads off, or strangle them. Mr. Hunt stated that this was a frequent custom, and cited a case where he had with difficulty saved a servant of his own from such a fate, who afterwards recovered his health.

Source

[#2] Charles Wilkes, "Elderly Parents and the Time to Die," *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, Vol. *III* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), pp. 92, 94–100.

[#3] Fiji: Deaths of the Old Chief and His Wives
(Thomas Williams, 1858)

When a chief is either dead or dying, the fact is announced to his various connexions; and should he be of supreme power, the principal persons in his dominions come to pay their respects, and offer a present to him. . . . I have heard the dead questioned in a style which has prevailed among every people where similar modes of lamentation have been observed. "Why did you die? Were you weary of us? We are around you now. Why do you close your eyes upon us?" Sometimes these wailings continue through the night, and their dreary, dismal effect cannot be imagined by any one who has not heard them. The tones are those of hopeless despair, and thrill through "nerve, and vein, and bone.". . .

. . . The next step is the preparation of the *loloku*. This word expresses anything done out of respect for the dead, but especially the strangling of friends. This custom may have had a religious origin, but at present the victims are not sacrificed as offerings to the gods, but merely to propitiate and honour the manes of the departed. It is strengthened by misdirected affection, joined with wrong notions of a future life. The idea of a chieftain going into the world of spirits unattended, is most repugnant to the native mind. So strong is the feeling in favour of the *loloku*, that Christianity is disliked because it rigorously discountenances the cherished custom. When the Christian chief of Dama fell by the concealed musketry of the Nawathans, a stray shot entered the forehead of a young man at some distance from him, and killed him. The event was regarded by many of the nominal Christians as most fortunate, since it provided a companion for the spirit of the slain chief.

Ordinarily, the first victim for the *loloku* is the man's wife, and more than one, if he has several. I have known the mother to be strangled too. In the case of a chief who has a confidential companion, this his right-hand man, in order to prevent a disruption in their intimacy, ought to die with his superior; and a neglect of this duty would lower him in public opinion. . . .

Choosing to Die

. . . In the case of a chief drowned at sea, or slain and eaten in war, the *loloku* is carefully observed, as well as if the deceased had died naturally, and been buried in a strange land. But in these instances the grief of the survivors is more impassioned, and their desire to manifest it by dying is more enthusiastic.

When Ra Mbithi, the pride of Somosomo, was lost at sea, seventeen of his wives were destroyed. After the news of the massacre of the Namena people at Viwa in 1839, eighty women were strangled to accompany the spirits of their murdered husbands.

Before leaving this dark subject, it demands more full and explicit examination. It has been said that most of the women thus destroyed are sacrificed at their own insistence. There is truth in this statement; but unless other facts are taken into account, it produces an untruthful impression. Many are importunate to be killed, because they know that life would thenceforth be to them prolonged insult, neglect, and want. Very often, too, their resolution is grounded upon knowing that their friends or children have determined that they shall die. Some women have

been known to carry to the grave the mats in which they and their dead husbands were to be shrouded, and, on their arrival, have helped to dig their own tomb. They then took farewell of their friends. . . .

If the friends of the woman are not the most clamorous for her death, their indifference is construed into disrespect either for her late husband or his friends, and would be accordingly resented. Thus the friends and children of the woman are prompted to urge her death, more by self-interest than affection for her, and by fear of the survivors rather than respect for the dead. Another motive is to secure landed property belonging to the husband, to obtain which they are ready to sacrifice a daughter, a sister, or a mother. Many a poor widow has been urged by the force of such motives as these, more than by her own apparent ambition, to become the favourite wife in the abode of spirits. . . .

. . . As it affects the children, this dreadful custom is fearfully cruel, depriving them of the mother when, by ordinary or violent means, they have become fatherless. Natural deaths are reduced to a small number among heathen Fijians, by the prevalence of war and the various systems of murder which custom demands. . . .

Source

[#3] Thomas Williams, "Deaths of the Old Chief and his Wives," *Fiji and the Fijians* (London: Alexander Heylan, Vol. *1*, 1858; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), pp. 160–176.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

[#4] Tikopian Attitudes Towards Suicide
(Raymond Firth, 1967)

Tikopia attitudes toward suicide are closely connected with their attitudes toward death in general. Summarily stated, these attitudes express regret concerning death rather than fear of it; . . . the timing of the moment of cessation of bodily functioning is not necessarily treated as a matter of critical importance. To take one's own life is merely to anticipate the inevitable end. In some circumstances, death has an aesthetic attraction. . . . [T]he normal Tikopia ways of committing suicide are three, differentiated broadly according to age and sex; hanging (mainly by middle-aged and elderly people); swimming out to sea (women only, especially young women); putting off to sea by canoe (men only, especially young men). Hanging (*noa na*, tying the neck) is usually fatal. . . . In swimming out to sea (*kau ki moana*), the women, though good swimmers, soon seem to be overcome by heavy seas or by sharks that are common off the coast, and mortality from such suicide attempts appears frequent . . . the fate of many unmarried young women. . . . But resort to putting off to sea in a canoe (*forau*) is more difficult to interpret. The Tikopia term in general indicates a sea voyage, and any canoe voyage from Tikopia is a hazardous undertaking. Tikopia is a mere dot in 40,000 square miles of ocean, with the nearest land, Anuta, equally isolated—only half a mile across and 70 miles away; larger land is more than 100 miles away and in some directions many hundreds of miles. With the alternation of storm and calm, especially in the monsoon season, to try to make landfall from Tikopia is a great risk. . . . In many cases it is difficult to separate an attempt to escape from Tikopia to see the world, with a serious chance of not surviving, from

an attempt to escape from Tikopia society with an intent to perish or an attitude of not caring whether one perishes or not.

. . . [S]ocial factors are clearly apparent both in the choice of method and in the attendant circumstances. In suicide at sea, an almost complete sex differential is manifested: a woman swims to her death, a man takes a canoe. Yet Tikopia men in ordinary circumstances swim as well and as freely as do women. Again, by report a curious fastidiousness is sometimes displayed in committing suicide. A person dying by hanging, it is said, excretes freely. If the deed is committed without premeditation, the interior of the house is in a mess: in the person's dying struggles mats and the interior of the house become covered with excrement. People coming to release him are disgusted, and before mourning begins women must clean up the disorder. For this reason, I was told, a person who is thinking of suicide by hanging may refrain from food for a day or so, in order "that his excrement may not be laughed at." It may seem to us unnecessary to be so finicky about the manner of dying, yet this has a crude logic. If part of the reason for destroying the body is to preserve the social personality intact—by safeguarding it from disintegrating despair or shame—then the person does not want his reputation to suffer by his death. Suicide in Tikopia is thought to merit certain dignity.

Source

[#4] Raymond Firth, "Tikopian Attitudes Towards Suicide," *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 120–124.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA
KIRIWINA/THE TROBRIAND ISLANDS

[#5] Suicide as an Act of Justice; Expiation and Insult: Jumping from a Palm
(Bronislaw Malinowski, 1916, 1926)

Suicide as an Act of Justice

There are three classes—death as the result of evil magic, death by poison, and death in warfare. There are also three roads leading to Tuma, and Topileta indicates the proper road according to the form of death suffered. There is no special virtue attached to any of these roads, though my informants were unanimous in saying that death in war was a "good death," that by poison not so good, while death by sorcery is the worst. These qualifications meant that a man would prefer to die one death rather than another; and though they did not imply any moral attribute attached to any of these forms, a certain glamour attached to death in war, and the dread of sorcery and sickness seem certainly to cause those preferences.

With death in warfare is classed one form of suicide, that in which a man climbs a tree and throws himself down (native name, *lo'u*). This is one of the two forms of suicide extant in Kiriwina, and it is practised by both men and women. Suicide seems to be very common. It is performed as an act of justice, not upon oneself, but upon some person of near kindred who has caused offence. As such it is one of the most important legal institutions among these natives. . . .

Expiation and Insult: Jumping from a Palm

. . . One day an outbreak of wailing and a great commotion told me that a death had occurred somewhere in the neighbourhood. I was informed that Kima'i, a young lad of my acquaintance, of sixteen or so, had fallen from a coco-nut palm and killed himself. . . .

I hastened to the next village. . . . I found that another youth had been severely wounded by some mysterious coincidence. And at the funeral there was obviously a general feeling of hostility between the village where the boy died and that into which his body was carried for burial.

Only much later was I able to discover the real meaning of these events: the boy had committed suicide. The truth was that he had broken the rules of exogamy, the partner in his crime being his maternal cousin, the daughter of his mother's sister. This had been known and generally disapproved of, but nothing was done until the girl's discarded lover, who had wanted to marry her and who felt personally injured, took the initiative. This rival threatened first to use black magic against the guilty youth, but this had not much effect. Then one evening he insulted the culprit in public—accusing him in the hearing of the whole community of incest and hurling at him certain expressions intolerable to a native.

For this there was only one remedy; only one means of escape remained to the unfortunate youth. Next morning he put on festive attire and ornamentation, climbed a coco-nut palm and addressed the community, speaking from among the palm leaves and bidding them farewell. He explained the reasons for his desperate deed and also launched forth a veiled accusation against the man who had driven him to his death, upon which it became the duty of his clansmen to avenge him. Then he wailed aloud, as is the custom, jumped from a palm some sixty feet high and was killed on the spot. There followed a fight within the village in which the rival was wounded; and a quarrel was repeated during the funeral.

. . . Let us now pass to suicide. Though by no means a purely juridical institution, suicide possesses incidentally a distinct legal aspect. It is practised by two serious methods *lo'u* (jumping off a palm top) and the taking of irremediable poison from the gall bladder of a globefish (*soka*); and by the milder method of partaking of some of the vegetable poison *tuva*, used for stunning fish. . . .

The two fatal forms of suicide are used as means of escape from situations without an issue and the underlying mental attitude is somewhat complex, embracing the desire of self-punishment, revenge, re-habilitation, and sentimental grievance. . . .

. . . Two motives must be registered in the psychology of suicide: first, there is always some sin, crime or passionate outburst to expiate, whether a breach of exogamous rules, or adultery, or an unjust injury done, or an attempt to escape one's obligations; secondly, there is a protest against those who have brought this trespass to light, insulted the culprit in public, forced him into an unbearable situation. One of these two motives may be at times more prominent than the other, but as a rule there is a mixture of both in equal proportions. The person publicly accused admits his or her guilt, takes all the consequences, carries out the punishment upon his own person, but at the same time declares that he has been badly treated, appeals to the sentiment of those who have driven him to the extreme if they are his friends or relatives, or if they are his enemies appeals to the solidarity of his kinsmen, asking them to carry on a vendetta (*lugwa*).

Suicide is certainly not a means of administering justice, but it affords the accused and oppressed one—whether he be guilty or innocent—a means of escape and rehabilitation. It looms large in the psychology of the natives, is a permanent damper on any violence of language

or behaviour, on any deviation from custom or tradition, which might hurt or offend another. Thus suicide, like sorcery, is a means of keeping the natives to the strict observance of the law, a means of preventing people from extreme and unusual types of behaviour. Both are pronounced conservative influences and as such are strong supports of law and order.

Sources

[#5] Bronislaw Malinowski, "Suicide as an Act of Justice," in "Baloma; the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 46 (London: 1916). Republished by Forgotten Books, 2008, pp. 9–10; "Expiation and Insult: Jumping from a Palm," *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1926), pp. 77–78, 94–98.

[#6] The Kaliai: Good Death, Bad Death
(David R. Counts and Dorothy Ayers Counts, 1983–84)

A good death—or a bad one—may be either voluntary or involuntary. Volition is not enough in itself to be definitive. Involuntary deaths, like those that have an external cause, may be either good or bad, while, with the exception of suicide, voluntary deaths are good ones. Widows who were ritually killed, for instance, died voluntarily and were considered to have had good deaths.

The quality of death is determined by the related conditions of whether the process of dying takes place slowly enough to permit the dying person and his or her kin to control the situation and prepare for the break, and of whether the death results in social disruption. Ideally, a person who perceives death approaching begins, in concert with kin and friends, to bring closure to the set of social relations that entangle him or her in the society of the living. The person has time to terminate ongoing business, to take leave of loved ones, and to withdraw from active participation in mundane life. He or she controls the beginning of the transition from the category of living being (*iavava*), to the category of recently dead ghost which may be seen by and interact with human beings (*anunu*), to the most remote category of spirit being, distant ancestors who may not be seen by humans and who seldom become involved in human affairs (*antu*). When a dying person does not have the opportunity to set in motion this process of withdrawal and transition, it must be done for him or her ritually by the survivors, and it is especially important that the termination of relationships with the living be completed through elaborate and dramatic mortuary ceremonies.

In general terms, for the Kaliai a good death is not socially disruptive. It is foreseen, there is time for the dying person and his or her kin to prepare for it and to publicly conclude any outstanding business, and there is public participation in the first stage of the transitional process that is death. If, however, the death is socially disruptive, the survivors suffer the agony of unanticipated parting, and they react with anger and a desire for vengeance. There is no peace either for the living or for the dead, for the spirit of the person who dies a bad death wanders and appears to his or her kin until the death is avenged. If the death was a suicide, the spirit never joins ghostly society but remains eternally separate and alone, perhaps to become the familiar of a conjuring sorcerer. . . .

. . . Obviously suicide is not a good death for the Kaliai. It is a death which permits neither the dead person nor his relatives peace, it is untimely and unforeseen by the community, it is socially disruptive, and it results in the eternal alienation of the suicide's spirit from the society of the dead as well as of the living. Why, then, would a person voluntarily choose such a death?

There is no clear answer to this question. Kaliai informants almost always explained that a person who killed him or herself either had suffered intolerable shame or had been enchanted by sorcery. Another explanation given was that by controlling his or her death, the suicide re-establishes some control over the social environment. . . .

. . . It is recognized in anthropological literature that suicide may be committed to punish someone else. This kind of suicide, termed revenge suicide or samsonic suicide by Jeffreys, is part of the cultural pattern of Kaliai.

. . . While suicide is not an everyday happening, it has great emotional impact on the community when and where it occurs. It is also a recurrent theme in the oral literature of northwest New Britain. Whether it takes place in story or in fact, the pattern is the same. Both men and women kill themselves during a period of strife between sexual partners or cowives, or directly following an episode in which they were shamed or abused by their *affines*. The act follows known rules and can be expected to have predictable results within the community where it happens. Customarily, suicides choose one of two methods; they either hang themselves or drink *tuva*, 'fish poison' made from the derris plant. When the Kaliai speak of self-killing they say *ipamatei* 'he killed himself'; they describe the method by which death was caused (he hanged himself; he drank *tuva*); or they attribute responsibility for the death—*tipamate eai ngani posanga* "they killed him with talk."

A person who contemplates suicide has the reasonable expectation that his or her kin and neighbors will respond to this act in certain predictable ways. The phrase "they killed him with talk," and the cry of Agnes's father "why did you kill my child?" are evidence that the Kaliai consider self-killing to be a form of homicide, an act for which another party is culpable. A person may expect kin and friends to hold someone else responsible for his or her death. The suicide places on his or her kin the obligation to avenge the person, and they expect that his or her spirit will continue to appear to them (as does the spirit of any victim on homicide or sorcery) until the obligation is met. There is no notion that the spirit itself has any malevolent power. In death, as in life, the suicide must wait for others to act on his or her behalf.

Revenge suicide is a political strategy available to otherwise powerless persons because of the element of culpability associated with it. The suicide makes certain that others know why he or she has taken his life and who is to be held responsible for the unbearable situation. Once they are apprised of these facts, the suicide may expect that his or her shamed, grieving, angry kin will avenge the death upon the tormentor. Note that the kin of the suicide are themselves shamed by the death. . . .

Source

[#6] David R. Counts and Dorothy Ayers Counts, "The Kaliai: Good Death, Bad Death," in "Aspects of Dying in Northwest New Britain," *Omega* 14(2), 1983–84, pp. 101–110.

MICRONESIA

GUAM

[#7] A Tale of Two Lovers Tying their Hair Together

***from* An Account of the Corvette L'Urainie's Sojourn at the Mariana Islands, 1819 (Louis de Freycinet, 1819)**

The nobles were strictly forbidden not only to ally themselves with the *mangatchang* girls, but even to take them as concubines. Still, instances of the breaking of that rule are cited. In such a case, though, the *matua* who was guilty took great pains to conceal himself from his own family, who, if they knew of the situation, would have inflicted capital punishment on him. In reality, the delinquent noble had no alternative, if he wished to avert pursuit, but to renounce his rank and class and to join another group, as an *atchaot*. It is interesting, incidentally, that the lowborn girl received no punishment at all. We were told that, after the arrival of the Spanish on Guam, a certain *matua* of the village of Gnaton fell in love with a young and pretty *mangatchang* girl and fled with her. He found no asylum among another native group, however, as he refused to part with her. Pursued by his relatives, the young lovers wandered for some time in the most inaccessible woods and rocky areas; but so precarious and wretched an existence reduced them to despair. Determined to put an end to it, they built a tomb of stones and placed in it the infant that was the sad fruit of their love. Then, lost and distracted, they climbed to the very summit of a high, steep-sided peak beside the sea. Binding themselves together by the hair, and clasping one another, they cast themselves from that peak into the waves below. The cape in question has since been named, by the Spanish, *Cabo de los Amantes* (Lovers' Cape).

Source

[#7] Freycinet, Louis Claude de, trans. Glynn Barratt, ["A Tale of Two Lovers Tying their Hair Together"], *An Account of the Corvette* L'Uraine*'s Sojourn at the Mariana Islands, 1819* (Saipan: N. M. I. Division of Historic Preservation and the RTF Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam, 2003), pp. 126–127.

CHUUK

[#8] Sea Spirit Spasms

***from* A Trukese Theory of Medicine**

(Frank Joseph Mahony, 1950–68, 1970) (*in Archive only*)

[#9] Group Rejection and Suicide

***from* Truk: Man in Paradise**

(Thomas Gladwin and Seymour Bernard Sarason, 1953) (*in Archive only*)

POLYNESIA

SAMOA

[#10] Who Will Go With Me?
(George Turner, 1884)

. . . In encouraging each other, on going to battle, they said, "Well, if we die, we shall not have to die over again. It is only the death we should have to die some other day." Suicide was common. In a fit of anger they jumped from the rocks into the ocean and were seen no more.

. . . On the neighbouring island of Aneiteum it was common, on the death of a chief, to strangle his wives, that they might accompany him to the regions of the departed. The custom has been found in various parts of the Pacific. The poor deluded woman rejoices in it, if she has any affection for her husband, and not only shows us the strength of her attachment, but also her firm belief in the reality of a future state. An old chief will say as he is dying, "Now, who will go with me?" and immediately one and another will reply, "I will." On the island of Aneiteum this revolting custom has entirely fled before the light of Christianity. By the common consent of the chiefs and people all over the island it is strictly forbidden, but, strange to say, it has found a refuge and a resting-place still in the group on Tana. About twenty years ago they commenced there to strangle the wives of a departed chief, and the custom spread over the island—another proof of the downward tendency of heathenism, and of its usual development in the increase of human wretchedness.

Source

[#10] George Turner, "Who Will Go With Me?" *Samoa: A Hundred Years Ago and Long Before* (London: Macmillan, 1884), pp. 305, 324–25.

TONGA

[#11] The Love-Sick of Vavau
***from* Diversions of a Prime Minister**

(Basil Thomson, 1886–91, 1894) (in Archive only)

NIUE ISLAND

[#12] Traditions of Niue
***from* History and Traditions of Niue**

(Edwin M. Loeb, 1926) *(in Archive only)*

PUKAPUKA, COOK ISLANDS

[#13] After Defeat in Fighting: Burying Oneself Alive *from* Ethnology of Pukapuka

(Ernest Beaglehole and Pearl Beaglehole, 1938) ***(expanded in Archive)***

There is no record in Pukapuka of pitched battles between opposing groups, or of warfare existing within the social structure of a definite institution . . . but the existence of weapons and stories about fighting shows that the island was not always at peace. Fighting incidents in stories of the fighting at Waletoa, the fighting against Yangalipule to the fighting of Tuiva against the men of Yato, the fighting against Uyo, and the fighting of Te Nana in Yayake, reveal that such fighting was caused by violation of the tapu of the reserves, quarrels over food divisions, personal rivalries, quarrels over division of the reserves, and like matters. The fighting that occurred rarely rose above the level of brawling, but where a pitched hand-to-hand contest resulted, much blood seems to have been shed for little cause. The number of deaths in these contests seems to have been increased by the fact that losers habitually committed suicide by having relatives bury them alive. . . .

Source

[#13] Ernest Beaglehole and Pearl Beaglehole, "After Defeat in Fighting: Burying Oneself Alive," *Ethnology of Pukapuka* (Honolulu, HI: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1938), pp. 373–398.

MARQUESAS

[#14] The Native Culture in the Marquesas (in Archive only)

Coconut Rites for Suicide (in Archive only)

Marquesan Legends: Tahia-noho-uu (in Archive only)
(E. S. Craighill Handy, 1920–21, 1923, 1930)

MANGAREVA, GAMBIER ISLANDS

[#15] Cliff Suicide: The Privilege of Women (expanded in Archive)
(Te Rangi Hiroa [Sir Peter H. Buck], 1938)

Suicide took place among both sexes through jealousy, anger, and sometimes loss of power and prestige. Men took their own lives in preference to being killed by the enemy. In the coral atolls of the Tuamotus, both men and women committed suicide by jumping off coconut trees. In Mangareva, another method was provided by cliffs.

In the time of Te Oa, some of his daughters as well as those of Te Ma-tetama committed suicide by jumping off a cliff on Mount Duff. This form of suicide became known as *rere maga* (to jump off a mountain) and the particular cliff used by these women of high rank was termed Te Rerega-o-te-ahine (The Jumping-off-place-of-the-women). Commoners jumped off another part

of the cliff. From the precedent set, the cliff form of suicide was supposed to be the special privilege of women, and men had to content themselves with jumping from coconut trees (*rere eréi*).

Source

[#15] Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter H. Buck), "Cliff Suicide: The Privilege of Women," *Ethnology of Mangareva* (Honolulu, HI: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1938).

NEW ZEALAND

[#16] The Maori Myth of Tane and *The Myth of Rakuru* (in Archive only)

from *The Ancient History of the Maori, His Mythology and Traditions* (John White, 1887)

[#17] Maori: Tupu and Mate (expanded in Archive) (J. Prytz Johansen, 1954)

There is a word which by its applications can teach us a great deal of what life is to the Maori. It is the word *tupu* [or *tipu*], "to unfold one's nature."

When the word is used about diseases, war and peace, thoughts and feelings, the meaning is evident, that these things arise and unfold their nature. A name unfolds its nature (*tupu*) by spreading, a grasp by being strong.

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. . . *tupu* means the natural unfolding, that is, for man, his life. That people die is tantamount to meaning that their *tupu*, their life, vanishes. On the other hand the reverse does not apply; for *tupu* is not only life as existence, but life as value as well. The grey hairs of old age, as *Tura* says, are "a sign that the *tupu* of man is dwindling, a sign of weakening."

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Life in its essential meaning, life which is worth living, the strength and courage of life thus are identical with honour. Life and honour constitute an indissoluble whole: "*tupu*." As regards the word this may only be quite clear in the case of the northern tribes: the experience itself is common to all Maoris; their actions show that life and honour are one.

. . . *Mate* is very nearly, if not exactly, the opposite of *tupu*. Starting from its use as a verb we may define *mate* as 'to be insufficient,' which may be either 'to be weakened' or 'to lack.' As a substantive the word correspondingly means 'weakening' or 'lack.' . . .

Applied to things and animals *mate* everywhere has a meaning opposite to that of *tupu*. The *tupu* of the moon is waxing, its *mate* is waning. The *mate* of the sea is being calm, that of the fire is to die away, go out. The *mate* of a fish is to be caught, that of a tree to be felled, that of work to cease, to be finished, etc.

What is most interesting, however, is the fact that *mate*, weakened, when referring to human beings is point by point the counterpart of *tupu*. *Tupu* may mean 'arise, come into existence'

and *mate* may mean 'to be dead.' Just as *tupu* includes the meanings of 'thriving' and 'gathering strength,' so *mate* may denote all degrees of 'being weakened.'

. . . The peculiar thing about the Maori's experience of life is that it is complete, indeed perfect. So it is, and so it must be. There are no departments in his life; he cannot, as a European, be a great man at the office and be henpecked at home. Life is a whole, therefore the whole of life is affected by an insult or weakening . . . the weakening has the effect that it may make the very will to live crumble away. Maning e.g. mentions that he knew a man "who, having been for two days plagued with toothache, cut his throat with a very blunt razor," adding that this kind of thing was not unusual. It is not the pain in itself which is decisive, for in that respect the Maori is not inferior to others, and there are instances on record of fantastic hardiness. No, it is the feeling of the weakening as a disease of both soul and body which eats away the zest for life, because there is no visible enemy from which he may demand satisfaction.

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Suicide thus is the extreme consequence of the fact that life is a whole and therefore stands as a whole or falls as a whole. Once again it is confirmed that there is no direct proportion between cause and consequences. Any weakening may without regard to magnitude hit home. Exactly the same causes may lead to suicide as to flight from the kinship group . . . the principal matter [is] that there is an inner weakening which eats life away from within, and that suicide is only a realisation of this. . . .

Shame also often drove the Maori to suicide. A chief, *Terekau*, who was visited by some people asked his wife to cook some food for the visitors. She told him to do so himself. Soon after Terekau was found in a tree, where he had hanged himself. The debtor who cannot pay, and the woman whose modesty is violated, and many others whom shame fills—guilty or innocent—are found among the suicides. But the greatest expression of the fact that shame carries death, is found in the myth about *Hinetitama*, the primal mother of man, who war first begotten by *Tane* and since became his wife and by him gave birth to man. For when she realized that she was married to her own father, she was seized with shame and *whakamomori* by fleeing to the underworld, where she later under the name of Hinenuitepo has drawn her descendants down into the land of the dead. This is the reason why people die, and thus we see the terrible power of shame in the fact that the shame of the primal mother puts death for man into the world order. But the myth also shows something else, viz. that by founding the land of the dead Hinenuitepo holds fast to her kin, which she draws down to her.

This is ultimately what divides suicide from flight. By flight the Maori gives up his kinship I, but by suicide there is a possibility of retaining the connexion. It may perhaps be said that the Maori in suicide sacrifices his individual I in order to recover his kinship I. (In this connexion it may be pointed out that suicides were actually common). . . .

It is, however, possible to approach a little nearer to the matter by looking in more detail on the ways chosen by the Maori when he takes his own life. It may happen that he quietly hangs himself; but not infrequently he kills himself in such a way that it is felt that he asserts himself by doing it.

Source

[#17] J. Prytz Johansen, "Maori: Tupu and Mate," *The Maori and His Religion in its Non-Ritualistic Aspects* (Copenhagen: I Kommission Hos Ejnar Munksgaard, 1954), pp. 40–61. Footnotes deleted.

[#18] The Spirit (in Archive only)

[#19] The Dying Maori Chief and his Old and Young Wives (Frederick Edward Maning, 1922)

My old rangatira at last began to show signs that his time to leave this world of care was approaching. He had arrived at a great age, and a rapid and general breaking up of his strength became plainly observable. He often grumbled that men should grow old, and oftener that no great war broke out in which he might make a final display, and die with eclat. . . . At last this old lion was taken seriously ill and removed permanently to the village, and one evening a smart handsome lad, of about twelve years of age, came to tell me that his *tupuna* was dying, and had said he would "go" to-morrow, and had sent for me to see him before he died. The boy also added that the tribe were *ka poto*, or assembled, to the last man around the dying chief. I must here mention that, though this old *rangatira* was not the head of his tribe, he had been for about half a century the recognised war chief of almost all the sections or *hapu* of a very numerous and warlike *iwi* or tribe, who had now assembled from all their distant villages and pas to see him die. I could not, of course, neglect the invitation, so at daylight next morning I started on foot for the native village, which I, on my arrival about mid-day, found crowded by a great assemblage of natives. I was saluted by the usual *haere mai!* and a volley of musketry, and I at once perceived that, out of respect to my old owner, the whole tribe from far and near, hundreds of whom I had never seen, considered it necessary to make much of me,—at least for that day,—and I found myself consequently at once in the position of a "personage." "Here comes the pakeha!—*his* pakeha!—make way for the pakeha!—kill those dogs that are barking at the pakeha!" Bang! bang! Here a double barrel nearly blew my cap off by way of salute. . . . On I stalked, looking neither to the right or the left, with my spear walking-staff in my hand, to where I saw a great crowd, and where I of course knew the dying man was. I walked straight on, not even pretending to see the crowd, as was "correct" under the circumstances; I being supposed to be entranced by the one absorbing thought of seeing "mataora," or once more in life my *rangatira*. The crowd divided as I came up, and closed again behind me as I stood in the front rank before the old chief, motionless, and, as in duty bound, trying to look the image of mute despair, which I flatter myself I did to the satisfaction of all parties. The old man I saw at once was at his last hour. He had dwindled to a mere skeleton. No food of any kind had been prepared for or offered to him for three days; as he was dying it was of course considered unnecessary. At his right side lay his spear, tomahawk, and musket. (I never saw him with the musket in his hand all the time I knew him.) Over him was hanging his greenstone *mere*, and at his left side, close, and touching him, sat a stout athletic savage, with a countenance disgustingly expressive of cunning and ferocity, and who, as he stealthily marked me from the corner of his eye, I recognized as one of those limbs of Satan, a Maori *tohunga*. The old man was propped up in a reclining position, his face towards the assembled tribe, who were all there waiting to catch his last words. I stood before him and I thought I perceived he recognized me. Still all was silence, and for a full half hour we all stood there, waiting patiently for the closing scene. . . . At last, suddenly without any apparent effort, and in a manner which startled me, the old man spoke clearly out, in the ringing metallic tone of voice for which he had been formerly so remarkable, particularly when excited. He spoke. "Hide my bones quickly where the enemy may not find them: hide them at once." He

spoke again—"Oh my tribe, be brave! Be brave that you may live. . . . He continued—"I give my *mere* to my pakeha,"—"my two old wives will hang themselves,"—(here a howl of assent from the two old women in the rear rank)—"I am going; be brave, after I am gone." Here he began to rave; . . . Then after a short pause—"Rescue! rescue! to my rescue! *ahau! ahau! rescue!*" The last cry for "rescue" was in such a piercing tone of anguish and utter desperation, that involuntarily I advanced a foot and hand, as if starting to his assistance; a movement, as I found afterwards, not unnoticed by the superstitious tribe. At the same instant that he gave the last despairing and most agonizing cry for "rescue," I saw his eyes actually blaze, his square jaw locked, he set his teeth, and rose nearly to a sitting position, and then fell back dying. He only murmured—"How sweet is man's flesh," and then the gasping breath and upturned eye announced the last moment. The *tohunga* now bending close to the dying man's ear, roared out "*Kia kotahi ki te ao!* . . . Then giving a significant look to the surrounding hundreds of natives, a roar of musketry burst forth. *Kia kotahi ki te ao!* Thus in a din like pandemonium, guns firing, women screaming, and the accursed *tohunga* shouting in his ear, died "Lizard Skin," as good a fighting man as ever worshipped force or trusted in the spear. His death on the whole was thought happy, for his last words were full of good omen:—"How sweet is man's flesh."

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The two old wives were hanging by the neck from a scaffold at a short distance, which had been made to place potatoes on out of the reach of rats. The shriveled old creatures were quite dead. . . .

The two young wives had also made a desperate attempt in the night to hang themselves, but had been prevented by two young men, who, by some unaccountable accident, had come upon them just as they were stringing themselves up, and who, seeing that they were not actually "ordered for execution," by great exertion, and with the assistance of several female relations, who they called to their assistance, prevented them from killing themselves out of respect for their old lord. Perhaps it was to revenge themselves for this meddling interference that these two young women married the two young men before the year was out, and in consequence of which, and as a matter of course, they were robbed by the tribe of everything they had in the world, (which was not much,) except their arms. They also had to fight some half dozen duels each with spears, in which, however, no one was killed, and no more blood drawn than could be well spared. All this went through with commendable resignation; and so, due respect having been paid to the memory of the old chief, and the appropriators of his widows duly punished according to law, further proceedings were stayed, and everything went on comfortably. And so the world goes round.

. . . In the afternoon I went home musing on what I had heard and seen. "Surely," thought I, "if one half of the world does not know how the other half live, neither do they know how they die."

Source

[#18] Frederick Edward Maning, "The Spirit," and "The Dying Maori Chief and his Old and Young Wives," *Old New Zealand: A Tale of the Good Old Times* (Auckland, NZ: Robert J. Creighton and Alfred Scales, 1863), pp. 62–63, 214–222.

HAWAII

[#20] The Secrecy of the Bones of a Chief
(Laura C. Green and Martha Warren Beckwith, 1926)

In case of [the death of] very high chiefs, called "*puholoholo*," or of hairless chiefs, called "*olohe*." When it was certain that the spirit had entirely left the body and would not return, a shallow pit was dug, large enough to hold the corpse and lined with the leaves of *amau* or *hapuu* ferns or of the *ti* or *banana* plant. The body was placed within and carefully covered with leaves, and over the whole, earth was sprinkled to a depth of from six to twelve inches. A huge bonfire was then kindled over the spot and kept burning for about twelve hours, when it was allowed to cool and the earth removed. The flesh was then easily separable from the bones. The flesh and entrails were deposited in one calabash, the bones in another and two men carried both calabashes to a secret cave.

One of these men was selected to act as *kahu* or "keeper" for the cave, the other was destined as the *moe puu* (that is, "sleeping together,") sacrifice whose blood was useful "to act as a barrier against evil which might touch the chief's body." The *kahu* stood without the cave while the other went in and deposited the bones. As he crawled out he was dispatched with a blow. Sometimes both the bearers were dispatched; often a number of retainers volunteered to die with their chief. Generally a lot was cast among the retainers by the relatives of the chief, and none but they knew who was destined for the sacrifice. The secret cave might be approached only by a rope over a cliff and, when the bearer was ascending, the rope might be cut at the top and his body be dashed upon the rocks below. So would the secret of the cave die with him.

The reason for this secrecy in depositing the bones of a chief was because of their value for making lucky arrows for rat shooting or hooks for fishing. . . . For the bones of a chief to fall into the hands of an enemy for this purpose was regarded as an insult to the family honor; hence the precaution taken to conceal the place of their burial.

Source

[#20] Laura C. Green and Martha Warren Beckwith, "The Secrecy of the Bones of a Chief," in "Hawaiian Customs and Beliefs Relating to Sickness and Death," *American Anthropologist* 28 (1926): 181–182.

Additional Sources

Te Rangi Hiroa, *The Coming of the Maori* (Wellington, NZ: Maori Purposes Fund Board, Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., 1952, pp. 417–418). Material in introduction from *On the Road to the Winds: An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands before European Contact* by Patrick Vinton Kirch (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); and communications from Kim Skoog, Nicholas Goetzfridt, and Don Rubinstein, University of Guam.

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY (1821–1881)

from *The Diary of a Writer*

In Lieu of a Preface on the Great and Little Bears, on the Prayer of the Great Goethe, And, Generally, on Bad Habits (*in Archive only*)
Two Suicides (*in Archive only*)
The Verdict
Arbitrary Assertions
A Few Words About Youth (*in Archive only*)
On Suicides and Haughtiness (*in Archive only*)
The Boy Celebrating His Saint's Day (*in Archive only*)
The Dream of a Strange Man: A Fantastic Story (*in Archive only*)

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow, the second child of a civil servant, a surgeon in a hospital for the poor. Despite their love of literature, Dostoevsky's father compelled his sons to attend the St. Petersburg Academy of Engineers to prepare for stable careers. In 1839, the father—a strict, irritable, and cruel personality—died. Although historians now argue that the cause of death was probably stroke, Dostoevsky believed throughout his life that his father had been murdered by his serfs, angered at his ill treatment of them. For the rest of his life, Dostoevsky would suffer guilt over his father's death, the product of his own ambivalent feelings.

Having published his first novel Poor Folk *(1846), which was praised by an influential critic as Russia's first significant social novel, and in the same year, a second but less well-received novel* The Double*, in 1847, Dostoevsky began to form a connection with the "Petrashevsky Circle," a moderately revolutionary group. The members of the group, including Dostoevsky, were arrested and convicted of conspiracy and subversion. The tsar, in order to emphasize his benevolence, staged a false execution before a firing squad, which was called off seconds before Dostoevsky believed his life would end. His time was then spent working off an eight-year sentence to hard labor and military service in Siberia. These experiences revived Dostoevsky's philosophy with spiritual revelations based on Christian love, redemption, and absolution.*

In 1864, Dostoevsky published Notes from the Underground*, in which he demonstrates that freedom is an essential attribute of man, yet argues against the notion that man (and the society organized around him) is rational. Man desires freedom, but unchecked freedom may lead to destruction. Dostoevsky subsequently published a number of major novels:* Crime and Punishment *(1866),* The Idiot *(1867–69),* The Possessed *(1871–72).* The Brothers Karamazov *(1879–80) is particularly noted for its section entitled "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," in which the figure of Christ conceives of man as capable of handling true freedom, while the Grand Inquisitor, the Devil, argues that man is cowardly, menial, and unable to endure freedom. Much of Dostoevsky's writing challenges rational, scientific humanitarianism and insists on the need for faith in God to achieve real freedom. Soon after completing this last work and already planning a sequel to it, Dostoevsky died of a pulmonary hemorrhage.*

As Gene Fitzgerald describes The Diary of a Writer *(1873–81), from which these selections are taken, Dostoevsky works out a rather developed scheme concerning the human being and*

"rectilinearity" (прямолинейность). In doing so, he establishes a basic requirement for his notion of what it is to be human. He divides people into two cateogories—those who are "reflective thinkers" and those who are "enthusiasts." The reflective thinkers continue to think and question their own conclusions and, while they sincerely believe in their ideas for a time, because they never stop thinking, they ultimately contradict, qualify, or negate them and can even "laugh at them" as somewhat ridiculous if warranted. Enthusiasts, on the other hand, are rectilinear thinkers, believing in and accepting their mental constructs as absolutes. Once they have constructed a belief system, they can "put their mind to rest" and, secure in their beliefs, they no longer need to question them. Thus, enthusiasts stop thinking; for this, Dostoevsky castigates them as "cast iron people" with "cast iron beliefs" who have become inert and have willingly given up the freedom of their consciousness. Such people, he asserts, have become spiritually dead. Clearly, for Dostoevsky, constant thought *is a basic requirement for earning the right to be called a human being.*

In the Diary, *Dostoevsky examines various cases of suicide, comparing and examining their differing motivations against the background of Russian society. In the view of Kenneth Lantz, Dostoevsky selects suicides that reveal fundamental spiritual crises in Russian life. "We have many inappropriate ideas," Dostoevsky wrote, ". . . In Russia an idea crashes upon a man as an enormous stone and half crushes him. And so he shrivels under it, knowing not how to extricate himself. One fellow is willing to live, though in a half-crushed state; but another one is unwilling and kills himself." It is the seeming unexplainedness of these differences that Dostoevsky explores.*

Sources

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, tr. Boris Brasol. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949, pp. 157–158, 335–338, 468–473, 538–547, 590–592, 676–678. Material in introduction from Gene Fitzgerald.

from THE DIARY OF A WRITER

The Verdict

Apropos, here is the deliberation of a suicide *out of tedium*—of course, a materialist.

". . . Indeed, what right did this nature have to bring me into this world pursuant to some of her eternal laws? I am created with consciousness and I did *conceive* nature: what right had she, therefore, to beget me without my will, without my will as a conscious creature?—Conscious implies suffering, but I do not wish to suffer, since why should I consent to suffering? Nature, through the medium of my consciousness, proclaims to me some sort of harmony of the whole. Human consciousness has produced religions out of this message. Nature tells me—even though I know well that I neither can nor ever shall participate in this 'harmony of the whole,' and besides, that I shall never even comprehend what it means—that nevertheless I must submit to this message, abase myself, accept suffering because of the harmony of the whole, and consent to live. However, if I were to make a conscious choice, of course I should rather wish to be happy only that moment when *I* exist, whereas I have no

interest whatever in the whole and its harmony after *I* perish, and it does not concern me in the least whether this whole with its harmony remains in the world after me or whether it perishes simultaneously with me. And why should I bother about its preservation after I no longer exist?—that's the question. It would have been better to be created like all animals—*i.e.*, living but not conceiving myself rationally. But my consciousness is not harmony, but, on the contrary, precisely disharmony, because with it I am unhappy. Look: who is happy in this world and what kind of people *consent* to live? Precisely those who are akin to animals and come nearest to their species by reason of their limited development and consciousness. These readily consent to live but on the specific condition that they live as animals, *i.e.*, eat, drink, sleep, build their nest and bring up children. To eat, drink and sleep, in the human tongue, means to grow rich to and plunder, while to build one's nest pre-eminently signifies—to plunder. Perhaps I may be told that one may arrange one's life and build one's nest on a rational basis, on scientifically sound social principles, and not by means of plunder, as heretofore.—All right, but I ask: What for? What is the purpose of arranging one's existence and of exerting so much effort to organize life in society soundly, rationally and righteously in a moral sense? Certainly no one will ever be able to give me an answer to this question. All that could be said in answer would be: 'To derive delight.' Yes, were I a flower or a cow, I should derive delight. But, incessantly putting questions to myself, as now, I cannot be happy even in face of the most lofty and *immediate* happiness of love of neighbor and of mankind, since I know that tomorrow all this will perish: I and all the happiness, and all the love, and all mankind will be converted into naught, into former chaos. And on such a condition, under no consideration, can I accept any happiness—and not because of my refusal to accept it, not because I am stubbornly adhering to some principle, but for the simple reason that I will not and cannot be happy on the condition of being threatened with tomorrow's zero. This is a feeling—a direct and immediate feeling—and I cannot conquer it. All right: if I were to die but mankind, instead of me, were to persist forever, then, perhaps I might be consoled. However, our planet is not eternal, while mankind's duration is just as brief a moment as mine. And no matter how rationally, happily, righteously and holily mankind might organize its life on earth—tomorrow all this will be made equal to that same zero. And even though all this be necessary, pursuant to some almighty, eternal and fixed law of nature, yet, believe me, in this idea there is some kind of most profound disrespect for mankind which, to me, is profoundly insulting and all the more unbearable as here there is no one who is guilty.

"And, finally, even were one to presume the possibility of that tale about man's ultimate attainment of a rational and scientific organization of life on earth—were one to believe this tale and the future happiness of man, the thought itself that, because of some inert laws, nature found it necessary to torture them thousands and thousands of years before granting them that happiness—this thought itself is unbearably repulsive. And if you add to this that this very nature which, finally, had admitted man to happiness will, for some reason, tomorrow find it necessary to convert all this into zero despite all the suffering with which mankind has paid for this happiness and—what is most important—without even bothering to conceal this from my consciousness, as it did conceal it from the cow—willy-nilly, there arises a most amusing, but also unbearably sad, thought: 'What if man has been placed on earth for some impudent experiment—just for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not this creature is going to survive on earth?' The principal sadness of this thought is in the fact

that here, again, there is no guilty one; no one conducted the experiment; there is no one to damn, since everything simply came to pass as a result of the inert laws of nature, which I do not understand at all, and with which my consciousness is altogether unable to reconcile itself. *Ergo:*

"Inasmuch as to my questions on happiness I am receiving from nature, through my own consciousness, only the answer that I can be happy not otherwise than the within harmony of the whole, which I do not comprehend, and which, it is obvious to me, I shall never be able to understand—

"Inasmuch as nature not only does not admit my right to demand an account from her, but even gives me no answer whatsoever—and not because she does not want to answer, but because she is unable to give me an answer—

"Inasmuch as I have convinced myself that nature, in order to answer my queries, designates (unconsciously) *my own self* and answers them with my own consciousness (since it is I who say all this to myself)—

"Finally, since, under these circumstances, I am assuming both the roles of a plaintiff and of a defendant, that of an accused and of a judge; and inasmuch as I consider this comedy, on the part of nature, altogether stupid, and to be enduring this comedy on my own part—even humiliating—

"Now, therefore, in my unmistakable role of a plaintiff and of a defendant, of a judge and of an accused, I sentence this nature, which has so unceremoniously and impudently brought me into existence for suffering, to annihilation, together with myself.

. . . And because I am unable to destroy nature, I am destroying only myself, weary of enduring a tyranny in which there is no guilty one.

N. N."

Arbitrary Assertions

My article—*The Verdict*—refers to the basic and loftiest idea of human existence—the necessity and inevitability of a belief in the immortality of the human soul. The underlying idea of this confession of a man perishing as a result of "a logical suicide" is the necessity of the immediate inference that without faith in one's soul and its immortality, man's existence is unnatural, unthinkable, impossible. Now, it seemed to me that I have dearly expressed the formula of a logical suicide, that I have discovered it. In him there is no faith in immortality; this he explains in the very beginning. Little by little, the thought of his aimlessness and his hatred of the muteness of the surrounding inertia lead him to the inevitable conviction of the utter absurdity of man's existence on earth. It becomes clear as daylight to him that only those men can consent to live who resemble the lower animals and who come nearest to the latter by reason of the limited development of their minds and their purely carnal wants. They agree to live specifically as animals, *i.e.*, in order "to eat, drink, sleep, build their nests and raise children." Indeed, eating, sleeping, polluting and sitting on soft cushions will long attract men to earth, but not the higher types. Meanwhile, it is the higher types that are and always have been, sovereign on earth, and invariably it so happened that, when the time was ripe, millions of people followed them.

I even assert and venture to say that love of mankind *in general, as an idea*, is one of the most incomprehensible ideas for the human mind. Precisely as an idea. Sentiment alone can vindicate

it. However, sentiment is possible precisely only in the presence of the accompanying conviction of the immortality of man's soul. (Another arbitrary assertion.)

It is clear, then, that suicide—when the idea of immortality has been lost—becomes an utter and inevitable necessity for any man who, by his mental development, has even slightly lifted himself above the level of cattle. On the contrary, immortality—promising eternal life—ties man all the more strongly to earth. Here there is a seeming contradiction: if there is so much life—that is, if in addition to earthly existence there is an immortal one—why should one be treasuring so highly his earthly life? And yet, the contrary is true, since only with faith in his immortality does man comprehend the full meaning of his rational destination on earth. However, without the faith in his immortality, man's ties with earth are severed, they grow thinner and more putrescent while the loss of the sublime meaning of life (felt at least in the form of unconscious anguish) inevitably leads to suicide.

Hence, the reverse moral of my October article: "If faith in immortality is so essential to man's existence, it is, therefore, a normal condition of the human race and, this being so, the immortality itself of the human soul exists undeniably." In a word, the idea of immortality is life itself—"live life," its ultimate formula, the mainspring of truth and just consciousness for humankind. Such was the object of my article, and I supposed that, willy-nilly, everyone who had read it would so comprehend it.

. . . Well, by the way. Perhaps it may be pointed out to me that in our age suicide is being committed by men who have never dwelt upon any abstract problems; nevertheless, they kill themselves mysteriously, without any apparent reason. In truth, we do perceive a great number of suicides (their abundance is also a mystery *sui generis*), strange and mysterious, committed not by reason of poverty or some affront, without any apparent reasons and not at all because of material need, unrequited love, jealousy, ill-health, hypochondria or insanity—but God only knows why. In our day, such cases constitute a great temptation, and since it is impossible to deny that they have assumed the proportions of an epidemic, they arise in the minds of many people as a most disturbing question. Of course, I am not venturing to explain all these suicides,—this I cannot do—but I am firmly convinced that the majority of the suicides, *in toto*, directly or indirectly, were committed as a result of one and the same spiritual illness—the absence in the souls of these men of the sublime idea of existence. . . . Again, I may be told that in our age even children are committing suicide, or such raw youths as have had no life experience. Even so, I am secretly convinced that it is our youth that suffers and agonizes because of the absence of sublime aims of life. In our families practically no mention is made about the sublime aims of life, while not only do they not give the slightest thought to the idea of immortality but much too frequently a satirical attitude is adopted toward it—and this in the presence of children from their early childhood, and perhaps with an express didactic purpose.

ROBERT G. INGERSOLL (1833–1899)

from *Is Suicide a Sin? Col. Ingersoll's Reply to his Critics* (expanded in Archive)

Robert Green Ingersoll, raised in New England as the son of a Congregational minister, became a noted agnostic lecturer. The family moved often because of his father's unpopularity for his liberal views; when young Ingersoll was nine, his father was prohibited from preaching altogether. Ingersoll's family settled in Illinois, where he and his brother became prominent trial lawyers. During the Civil War, Ingersoll led a volunteer Union regiment; he was captured along with many of his men, but was paroled and discharged in 1863.

Attacking popular Christian beliefs and supporting the views of Darwin and Huxley, Ingersoll became known as "the great agnostic"—the word was newly coined—a title he proudly claimed. While his radical views on topics such as religion and women's suffrage limited his political success, he did serve as attorney general of Illinois from 1867–69, and was an influential spokesman for various Republican candidates.

Ingersoll's lectures on religion, science, literature, politics, and history became famous, and the legendary force of his oratory won him many patrons, clients, and lecture opportunities. In 1879, he moved to Washington with hopes of expanding his law practice and finding a larger audience for his views. His religious thinking during this time, highly critical of conventional Christian beliefs such as the existence of God and immortality, was expressed in lectures including "Some Mistakes of Moses" (1879), "Why I am an Agnostic" (1896), and "Superstition" (1898). He continued to insist, however, that he neither affirmed nor denied the existence of God—rather, he said, "I wait."

In this reply to his critics, originally published in the New York Evening Telegram *of 1892, addressing the question of whether suicide is a sin, Ingersoll affirms man's right to kill himself and dismisses religious arguments to the contrary. Suicide is not cowardly; it can be the result of a rational decision. In fact, Ingersoll argues, suicide lies at the very heart of Christianity: "If Christ were God," Ingersoll insists, he could have protected himself from his assailants, and since he did not do so, "he consented to his own death and was guilty of suicide." Christ could have made himself known; he could have avoided pain; he could have "changed the crucifixion to a joy."*

Sources

Robert G. Ingersoll, "Is Suicide a Sin? Colonel Ingersoll's Reply to His Critics," in *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. New York: Dresden Publishing Co., C. P. Farrell, 1895, 1903, Vol. 7, pp. 388–408. Also available from the Secular Web Library at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll/reply_to_critics-suicide.html.

from IS SUICIDE A SIN? COL. INGERSOLL'S REPLY TO HIS CRITICS

In the article written by me about suicide the ground was taken that "under many circumstances a man has the right to kill himself."

This has been attacked with great fury by clergymen, editors and the writers of letters. These people contend that the right of self-destruction does not and cannot exist. They insist that life is the gift of God, and that he only has the right to end the days of men; that it is our duty to bear the sorrows that he sends with grateful patience. Some have denounced suicide as the worst of crimes—worse than the murder of another. . . .

. . . It seems to me that these three propositions [discussed earlier in this article] have been demonstrated to be true: First, that under some circumstances a man has the right to take his life; second, that the man who commits suicide is not a physical coward, and, third, that some who have committed suicide were at the time sane and in full possession of their minds.

. . . I insisted, and still insist, that suicide was and is the foundation of the Christian religion. I still insist that if Christ were God he had the power to protect himself without injuring his assailants—that having that power it was his duty to use it, and that failing to use it he consented to his own death and was guilty of suicide.

To this the clergy answer that it was self-sacrifice for the redemption of man, that he made an atonement for the sins of believers. These ideas about redemption and atonement are born of a belief in the "fall of man, on account of the sins of our first parents," and of the declaration that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." The foundation has crumbled. No intelligent person now believes in the "fall of man"—that our first parents were perfect, and that their descendants grew worse and worse, at least until the coming of Christ.

Intelligent men now believe that ages and ages before the dawn of history, man was a poor, naked, cruel, ignorant and degraded savage, whose language consisted of a few sounds of terror, of hatred and delight; that he devoured his fellow-man, having all the vices, but not all the virtues of the beasts; that the journey from the den to the home, the palace, has been long and painful, through many centuries of suffering, of cruelty and war; through many ages of discovery, invention, self-sacrifice and thought.

Redemption and atonement are left without a fact on which to rest. The idea that an infinite God, creator of all worlds, came to this grain of sand, learned the trade of a carpenter, discussed with Pharisees and scribes, and allowed a few infuriated Hebrews to put him to death that he might atone for the sins of men and redeem a few believers from the consequences of his own wrath, can find no lodgment in a good and natural brain.

In no mythology can anything more monstrously unbelievable be found.

But if Christ were a man and attacked the religion of his times because it was cruel and absurd; if he endeavored to found a religion of kindness, of good deeds, to take the place of heartlessness and ceremony, and if, rather than to deny what he believed to be right and true, he suffered death, then he was a noble man—a benefactor of his race. But if he were God there was no need of this. The Jews did not wish to kill God. If he had only made himself known all knees would have touched the ground. If he were God it required no heroism to

die. He knew that what we call death is but the opening of the gates of eternal life. If he were God there was no self-sacrifice. He had no need to suffer pain. He could have changed the crucifixion to a joy.

. . . I say that it is wonderful to me that so many men, so many women endure and carry their burdens to the natural end; that so many, in spite of "age, ache and penury," guard with trembling hands the spark of life; that prisoners for life toil and suffer to the last; that the helpless wretches in poorhouses and asylums cling to life; that the exiles in Siberia, loaded with chains, scarred with the knout, live on; that the incurables. Whose every breath is a pang, and for whom the future has only pain, should fear the merciful touch and clasp of death.

It is but a few steps at most from the cradle to the grave: a short journey. The suicide hastens, shortens the path, loses the afternoon, the twilight, the dusk of life's day; loses what he does not want, what he cannot bear. In the tempest of despair, in the blind fury of madness, or in the calm of thought and choice, the beleaguered soul finds the serenity of death.

Let us leave the dead where nature leaves them. We know nothing of any realm that lies beyond the horizon of the known, beyond the end of life. Let us be honest with ourselves and others. Let us pity the suffering, the despairing, the men and women hunted and pursued by grief and shame, by misery and want, by chance and fate until their only friend is death.

A. B. MITFORD, LORD REDESDALE (1837–1916)

from *An Account of the Hara-Kiri*

Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford, 1st Baron of Redesdale, was the second secretary to the British Legation in Japan when he published Tales of Old Japan *(1871), a collection of stories, fairy tales, accounts of superstitions, sermons, and other short pieces based on traditional Japanese culture. He had learned Japanese, and in his writings he drew from materials describing virtually all the classes in Japanese culture—except, as he acknowledged, the Emperor and his court. Mitford saw his work as an effort to depict the social and cultural life of the traditional feudal system just as it was passing away, "like a dissolving view," during the latter years of the 19th century.*

In 1868, Mitford was sent to witness an occasion of seppuku *as the representative of the British Legation, one of seven foreign witnesses who were the first outsiders to witness such an execution. In his now-classic account of* hara-kiri, *or "cutting the belly" (q.v., under Daidoji Yuzan), Mitford describes the ceremony, which had been ordered by the Mikado himself. The self-execution was performed at night in a temple near Kobe; the condemned man was Taki Zenzaburo, a samurai officer who had given the order to fire on foreigners in the Kobe settlement.*

Mitford's direct observations are followed by an account translated from a rare Japanese manuscript that contrasts traditional and then-contemporary practices of ritual suicide. This is followed by accounts of several variants of seppuku *in different capital-punishment contexts. Between its*

origins in the late 12th century and the 19th-century practice Mitford was describing, seppuku *had evolved from being a demonstration of the extreme courage of the true samurai into a highly elaborate ceremony in which every detail was rigorously stipulated by custom and tradition. Of particular interest in Mitford's account is his reference to the debates in the Japanese Parliament in 1869 over a proposal to abolish* seppuku*—a proposal that was roundly rejected. During World War II,* seppuku *would be performed by countless numbers of Japanese officers in the South Pacific, and immediately after Japan's surrender to the Allies, some patriots committed* seppuku *on the grounds of the Imperial Palace as a way of apologizing to the Emperor for losing the war. The ritual self-disembowelment of the well-known writer and Nobel Prize nominee Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), intended as protest and admonition against the modernization of Japan, also followed these ceremonial patterns.*

Source

A. B. Mitford, "An Account of the Hara-Kiri," in *Tales of Old Japan*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1883, pp. 355–363. Available online from Project Gutenberg Release # 13015 at http://www.gutenberg.org/.

from AN ACCOUNT OF THE HARA-KIRI

As a corollary to the above elaborate statement of the ceremonies proper to be observed at the *hara-kiri*, I may here describe an instance of such an execution which I was sent officially to witness. The condemned man was Taki Zenzaburô, an officer of the Prince of Bizen, who gave the order to fire upon the foreign settlement at Hiogo in the month of February 1868,—an attack to which I have alluded in the preamble to the story of the Eta Maiden and the Hatamoto. Up to that time no foreigner had witnessed such an execution, which was rather looked upon as a traveller's fable.

The ceremony, which was ordered by the Mikado himself, took place at 10.30 at night in the temple of Seifukuji, the headquarters of the Satsuma troops at Hiogo. A witness was sent from each of the foreign legations. We were seven foreigners in all.

We were conducted to the temple by officers of the Princes of Satsuma and Choshiu. Although the ceremony was to be conducted in the most private manner, the casual remarks which we overheard in the streets, and a crowd lining the principal entrance to the temple, showed that it was a matter of no little interest to the public. The courtyard of the temple presented a most picturesque sight; it was crowded with soldiers standing about in knots round large fires, which threw a dim flickering light over the heavy eaves and quaint gable-ends of the sacred buildings. We were shown into an inner room, where we were to wait until the preparation for the ceremony was completed: in the next room to us were the high Japanese officers. After a long interval, which seemed doubly long from the silence which prevailed, Itô Shunské, the provisional Governor of Hiogo, came and took down our names, and informed us that seven *kenshi*, sheriffs or witnesses, would attend on the part of the Japanese. He and another officer represented the Mikado; two captains of Satsuma's infantry, and two of Choshiu's, with a representative of the Prince of Bizen, the clan of the condemned man, completed the number, which

was probably arranged in order to tally with that of the foreigners. Itô Shunské further inquired whether we wished to put any questions to the prisoner. We replied in the negative.

A further delay then ensued, after which we were invited to follow the Japanese witnesses into the *hondo* or main hall of the temple, where the ceremony was to be performed. It was an imposing scene. A large hall with a high roof supported by dark pillars of wood. From the ceiling hung a profusion of those huge gilt lamps and ornaments peculiar to Buddhist temples. In front of the high altar, where the floor, covered with beautiful white mats, is raised some three or four inches from the ground, was laid a rug of scarlet felt. Tall candles placed at regular intervals gave out a dim mysterious light, just sufficient to let all the proceedings be seen. The seven Japanese took their places on the left of the raised floor, the seven foreigners on the right. No other person was present.

After an interval of a few minutes of anxious suspense, Taki Zenzaburô, a stalwart man, thirty-two years of age, with a noble air, walked into the hall attired in his dress of ceremony, with the peculiar hempen-cloth wings which are worn on great occasions. He was accompanied by a *kaishaku* and three officers, who wore the *jimbaori* or war surcoat with gold-tissue facings. The word *kaishaku*, it should be observed, is one to which our word *executioner* is no equivalent term. The office is that of a gentleman: in many cases it is performed by a kinsman or friend of the condemned, and the relation between them is rather that of principal and second than that of victim and executioner. In this instance the *kaishaku* was a pupil of Taki Zenzaburô, and was selected by the friends of the latter from among their own number for his skill in swordsmanship.

With the *kaishaku* on his left hand, Taki Zenzaburô advanced slowly towards the Japanese witnesses, and the two bowed before them, then drawing near to the foreigners they saluted us in the same way, perhaps even with more deference: in each case the salutation was ceremoniously returned. Slowly, and with great dignity, the condemned man mounted on to the raised floor, prostrated himself before the high altar twice, and seated himself on the felt carpet with his back to the high altar, the *kaishaku* crouching on his left-hand side. One of the three attendant officers then came forward, bearing a stand of the kind used in temples for offerings, on which, wrapped in paper, lay the *wakizashi*, the short sword or dirk of the Japanese, nine inches and a half in length, with a point and an edge as sharp as a razor's. This he handed, prostrating himself, to the condemned man, who received it reverently, raising it to his head with both hands, and placed it in front of himself.

After another profound obeisance, Taki Zenzaburô, in a voice which betrayed just so much emotion and hesitation as might be expected from a man who is making a painful confession, but with no sign of either in his face or manner, spoke as follows:—

"I, and I alone, unwarrantably gave the order to fire on the foreigners at Kôbé, and again as they tried to escape. For this crime I disembowel myself, and I beg you who are present to do me the honour of witnessing the act."

Bowing once more, the speaker allowed his upper garments to slip down to his girdle, and remained naked to the waist. Carefully, according to custom, he tucked his sleeves under his knees to prevent himself from falling backwards; for a noble Japanese gentleman should die falling forwards. Deliberately, with a steady hand, he took the dirk that lay before him; he looked at it wistfully, almost affectionately; for a moment he seemed to collect his thoughts for the last time, and then stabbing himself deeply below the waist on the left-hand side, he drew the dirk slowly across to the right side, and, turning it in the wound, gave a slight cut upwards. During this sickeningly painful operation he never moved a muscle of his face. When he drew

out the dirk, he leaned forward and stretched out his neck; an expression of pain for the first time crossed his face, but he uttered no sound. At that moment the *kaishaku*, who, still crouching by his side, had been keenly watching his every movement, sprang to his feet, poised his sword for a second in the air; there was a flash, a heavy, ugly thud, a crashing fall; with one blow the head had been severed from the body.

A dead silence followed, broken only by the hideous noise of the blood throbbing out of the inert heap before us, which but a moment before had been a brave and chivalrous man. It was horrible.

The *kaishaku* made a low bow, wiped his sword with a piece of paper which he had ready for the purpose, and retired from the raised floor; and the stained dirk was solemnly borne away, a bloody proof of the execution.

The two representatives of the Mikado then left their places, and, crossing over to where the foreign witnesses sat, called us to witness that the sentence of death upon Taki Zenzaburô had been faithfully carried out. The ceremony being at an end, we left the temple.

The ceremony, to which the place and the hour gave an additional solemnity, was characterized throughout by that extreme dignity and punctiliousness which are the distinctive marks of the proceedings of Japanese gentlemen of rank; and it is important to note this fact, because it carries with it the conviction that the dead man was indeed the officer who had committed the crime, and no substitute. While profoundly impressed by the terrible scene it was impossible at the same time not to be filled with admiration of the firm and manly bearing of the sufferer, and of the nerve with which the *kaishaku* performed his last duty to his master. Nothing could more strongly show the force of education. The Samurai, or gentleman of the military class, from his earliest years learns to look upon the *hara-kiri* as a ceremony in which some day he may be called upon to play a part as principal or second. In old-fashioned families, which hold to the traditions of ancient chivalry, the child is instructed in the rite and familiarized with the idea as an honourable expiation of crime or blotting out of disgrace. If the hour comes, he is prepared for it, and gravely faces an ordeal which early training has robbed of half its horrors. In what other country in the world does a man learn that the last tribute of affection which he may have to pay to his best friend may be to act as his executioner?

Since I wrote the above, we have heard that, before his entry into the fatal hall, Taki Zenzaburô called round him all those of his own clan who were present, many of whom had carried out his order to fire, and, addressing them in a short speech, acknowledged the heinousness of his crime and the justice of his sentence, and warned them solemnly to avoid any repetition of attacks upon foreigners. They were also addressed by the officers of the Mikado, who urged them to bear no ill-will against us on account of the fate of their fellow-clansman. They declared that they entertained no such feeling.

The opinion has been expressed that it would have been politic for the foreign representatives at the last moment to have interceded for the life of Taki Zenzaburô. The question is believed to have been debated among the representatives themselves. My own belief is that mercy, although it might have produced the desired effect among the more civilized clans, would have been mistaken for weakness and fear by those wilder people who have not yet a personal knowledge of foreigners. The offence—an attack upon the flags and subjects of all the Treaty Powers, which lack of skill, not of will, alone prevented from ending in a universal massacre—was the gravest that has been committed upon foreigners since their residence in Japan. Death

was undoubtedly deserved, and the form chosen was in Japanese eyes merciful and yet judicial. The crime might have involved a war and cost hundreds of lives; it was wiped out by one death. I believe that, in the interest of Japan as well as in our own, the course pursued was wise, and it was very satisfactory to me to find that one of the ablest Japanese ministers, with whom I had a discussion upon the subject, was quite of my opinion.

The ceremonies observed at the *hara-kiri* appear to vary slightly in detail in different parts of Japan; but the following memorandum upon the subject of the rite, as it used to be practised at Yedo during the rule of the Tycoon, clearly establishes its judicial character. I translated it from a paper drawn up for me by a Japanese who was able to speak of what he had seen himself. Three different ceremonies are described:—

1st. *Ceremonies observed at the "hara-kiri" of a Hatamoto (petty noble of the Tycoon's court) in prison.*—This is conducted with great secrecy. Six mats are spread in a large courtyard of the prison; an *ometsuké* (officer whose duties appear to consist in the surveillance of other officers), assisted by two other *ometsukés* of the second and third class, acts as *kenshi* (sheriff or witness), and sits in front of the mats. The condemned man, attired in his dress of ceremony, and wearing his wings of hempen cloth, sits in the centre of the mats. At each of the four corners of the mats sits a prison official. Two officers of the Governor of the city act as *kaishaku* (executioners or seconds), and take their place, one on the right hand and the other on the left hand of the condemned. The *kaishaku* on the left side, announcing his name and surname, says, bowing, "I have the honour to act as *kaishaku* to you; have you any last wishes to confide to me?" The condemned man thanks him and accepts the offer or not, as the case may be. He then bows to the sheriff, and a wooden dirk nine and a half inches long is placed before him at a distance of three feet, wrapped in paper, and lying on a stand such as is used for offerings in temples. As he reaches forward to take the wooden sword, and stretches out his neck, the *kaifihaku* on his left-hand side draws his sword and strikes off his head. The *kaishaku* on the right-hand side takes up the head and shows it to the sheriff. The body is given to the relations of the deceased for burial. His property is confiscated.

2nd. *The ceremonies observed at the "hara-kiri" of a Daimio's retainer.*—When the retainer of a Daimio is condemned to perform the *hara-kiri*, four mats are placed in the yard of the *yashiki* or palace. The condemned man, dressed in his robes of ceremony and wearing his wings of hempen cloth, sits in the centre. An officer acts as chief witness, with a second witness under him. Two officers, who act as *kaishaku*, are on the right and left of the condemned man; four officers are placed at the corners of the mats. The *kaishaku*, as in the former case, offers to execute the last wishes of the condemned. A dirk nine and a half inches long is placed before him on a stand. In this case the dirk is a real dirk, which the man takes and stabs himself with on the left side, below the navel, drawing it across to the right side. At this moment, when he leans forward in pain, the *kaishaku* on the left-hand side cuts off the head. The *kaishaku* on the right-hand side takes up the head, and shows it to the sheriff. The body is given to the relations for burial. In most cases the property of the deceased is confiscated.

3rd. *Self-immolation of a Daimio on account of disgrace.*—When a Daimio had been guilty of treason or offended against the Tycoon, inasmuch as the family was disgraced, and an apology could neither be offered nor accepted, the offending Daimio was condemned to *hara-kiri*. Calling his councillors around him, he confided to them his last will and testament for transmission to the Tycoon. Then, clothing himself in his court dress, he disembowelled himself, and cut his own throat. His councillors then reported the matter to the Government, and a coroner was sent to

investigate it. To him the retainers handed the last will and testament of their lord, and be took it to the Gorôjiu (first council), who transmitted it to the Tycoon. If the offence was heinous, such as would involve the ruin of the whole family, by the clemency of the Tycoon, half the property might be confiscated, and half returned to the heir; if the offence was trivial, the property was inherited intact by the heir, and the family did not suffer.

In all cases where the criminal disembowels himself of his own accord without condemnation and without investigation, inasmuch as he is no longer able to defend himself, the offence is considered as non-proven, and the property is not confiscated. In the year 1869 a motion was brought forward in the Japanese parliament by one Ono Seigorô, clerk of the house, advocating the abolition of the practice of *hara-kiri*. Two hundred members out of a house of 209 voted against the motion, which was supported by only three speakers, six members not voting on either side. In this debate the *seppuku*, or *hara-kiri*, was called "the very shrine of the Japanese national spirit, and the embodiment in practice of devotion to principle," "a great ornament to the empire," "a pillar of the constitution," "a valuable institution, tending to the honour of the nobles, and based on a compassionate feeling towards the official caste," "a pillar of religion and a spur to virtue." The whole debate (which is well worth reading, and an able translation of which by Mr. Aston has appeared in a recent Blue Book) shows the affection with which the Japanese cling to the traditions of a chivalrous past. It is worthy of notice that the proposer, Ono Seigorô, who on more than one occasion rendered himself conspicuous by introducing motions based upon an admiration of our Western civilization, was murdered not long after this debate took place.

There are many stories on record of extraordinary heroism being displayed in the *hara-kiri*. The case of a young fellow, only twenty years old, of the Choshiu clan, which was told me the other day by an eye-witness, deserves mention as a marvellous instance of determination. Not content with giving himself the one necessary cut, he slashed himself thrice horizontally and twice vertically. Then he stabbed himself in the throat until the dirk protruded on the other side, with its sharp edge to the front; setting his teeth in one supreme effort, he drove the knife forward with both hands through his throat, and fell dead.

One more story and I have done. During the revolution, when the Tycoon, beaten on every side, fled ignominiously to Yedo, he is said to have determined to fight no more, but to yield everything. A member of his second council went to him and said, "Sir, the only way for you now to retrieve the honour of the family of Tokugawa is to disembowel yourself; and to prove to you that I am sincere and disinterested in what I say, I am here ready to disembowel myself with you." The Tycoon flew into a great rage, saying that he would listen to no such nonsense, and left the room. His faithful retainer, to prove his honesty, retired to another part of the castle, and solemnly performed the *hara-kiri*.

ARCTIC INDIGENOUS CULTURES (documented 1840–1940)

Selections extended in the Digital Archive or that appear in their entirety in the Archive may be accessed through this single QR code:

Eskimo of Diomede Island

#1. *Father and Son*
(Edward Moffat Weyer, 1932)

Aleut

#2. *Are the Aleut Prone to Commit Suicide?*
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St. Lawrence Eskimo

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#10. *The Moon Spirit*
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#11. *Death, and Life in the Land of the Dead*
(Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

#12. *Those Who Were Left Behind*
(Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

Hudson Bay Inuit

#13. *Desertion of Old Women* (in Archive only)
(Lucian M. Turner, 1882–84, 1889–90)

Eskimo of Baffin Island
#14. *Theological Questions*
(Charles Francis Hall, 1860–62)
#15. *Tribal Life* (in Archive only)
(Julian Bilby 1923)
Labrador Eskimo
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(Ernest W. Hawkes, 1914)
Greenland Eskimo
#17. *The Old Woman and the Cliff*
(Fridtjof Nansen, 1893)

The native inhabitants of Arctic and sub-Arctic North America and the tip of northeastern Siberia include a wide range of groups, often loosely referred to as the Eskimo or the Inuit. Generally, these peoples had no name for themselves as a group, and terms for the complete population were given by outsiders. The word "Eskimo," a name sometimes said to mean "eaters of raw meat," is now often regarded as derogatory; more plausible etymologies trace the name from Montagnais, an Algonquian language, as "snowshoe netters" or "people who speak a different language." The terms "Inuit" or "Yuit" (meaning "people" or "real people") and "Inupiaq" are also frequently used. There is no universal term accepted in all regions: the terms "Eskimo" and "Alaska Native" are more frequently used in Alaska; "Inuit" and "Inuinnaq" in Canada; and "Kalaallit" or "Greenlanders" in Greenland. Names used in the sources presented here follow the original in each case.

Arctic groups are speakers of languages within two principal branches, the Aleut and the Eskimoan, which include among others the languages Yupik, Yuit, and Inuit. While there is ongoing disagreement about precise dates, most specialists believe that all Eskimo-Aleut groups moved across the Bering land bridge several millennia ago; after reaching Alaska, they first separated into Aleut and Eskimoan, and then the latter group separated into Yupik and Inuit; some Yupik groups then migrated back across the Bering at a later date. They are all primarily coastal groups. Arctic cultures spread from Siberia in the west, across Alaska and Canada, to Greenland in the east; the selections provided here are presented in approximately this geographical order. At the westernmost extent of Arctic habitation are the Siberian Eskimo and the Eskimo of the Bering Strait, a grouping that includes the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence and Diomede Islands, as well as the Aleutian Islands. Moving east and north, Eskimo groups are found in western, northern, and southern Alaska, as well as the Mackenzie Eskimo near the Canadian border. In north-central Canada, there are several groups including the Netsilik and Iglulik, along with the Caribou and Copper Inuit. Toward the east, there are the Labrador Eskimo and the Eskimo of Baffin Island. Finally, the Inuit of Greenland inhabit the easternmost portion of the western-hemisphere Arctic world. Many of the religious, social, psychological, and economic patterns of culture are relatively constant across these various groups, although important differences do exist.

Arctic peoples have persisted despite harsh climatic conditions. Winter temperatures across the areas inhabited average minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit; snow blankets the ground from September until June. Most groups live in coastal regions and have traditionally subsisted by hunting marine mammals, including seal and whale, as well as by fishing and hunting some land animals, like caribou.

It is believed that the first contact between Europeans and Arctic peoples occurred in southern Greenland around the 12th century A.D. as the Eskimo migrating south and east came into contact with Norse settlers (including Erik the Red). Friendly relations apparently deteriorated and conflict raged until the early 1400s, when the Norse disappeared somewhat mysteriously; the poor relations with the Inuit, climate changes, and trade difficulties all might have contributed to the demise of the Scandinavians in Greenland. Also, some have speculated that the Norse were assimilated by the native inhabitants (see, e.g., Nansen, 1911, and Oleson, 1963). The similarities that exist between the Viking and the Greenlandic conception of death by violence might serve to support this theory, or they may indicate some other sort of exchange of ideas and cultural values between the two groups.

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Arctic peoples first came into enduring contact with Europeans. The Jesuits began missionizing in 1605; whaling ships and other vessels used routes along the coast; Henry Hudson arrived in 1610; and Hudson's Bay Company opened its first trading station in Labrador in 1749. Europeans began fishing intensively off the coast in the late 1770s. Such contact initiated a cultural revolution among the Eskimo that continues today. Widespread interaction with Europeans began in the 18th and 19th centuries, and several American and European expeditions were sent to study Eskimo ethnology and archaeology during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These include the famous Fifth Thule Expedition (1921–24) led by Knud Rasmussen, a Danish explorer and ethnologist born in Greenland who was himself half Inuit and spoke Greenland Inuit, as well as several Canadian dialects, and the Canadian Arctic Expedition (1913–18) led by Diamond Jenness. Since the Eskimo were not a people who kept written records, the accounts of these early expeditions are the only way to access original Inuit beliefs; however, it must be remembered that these accounts are filtered through the lenses of outside observers who bring with them their own sets of assumptions and biases.

The Selections

A review of these early accounts indicates that suicide was a common practice among many Arctic groups, though Veniaminov (selection #2) voices skepticism about claims that the Aleut are prone to commit suicide and Jenness's account of the Copper Eskimo (selection #6) argues that suicide is extremely rare. In some or many groups, individuals who were near the end of life, when they perceived their utility to the group as minimal, would seek suicide as a way to relieve their fellows of the burden of having to care for them. Examples of this seemingly altruistic type of suicide include Ernest W. Hawkes's 1914 report on the Labrador Eskimo (selection #16), Kaj Birket-Smith's description of the Caribou Eskimo, documented in 1921–24 (selection #8), and Julian Bilby's 1923 observations of the Inuit of Baffin Island (selection #15). If these reports are accurate (though like all reports of oral cultures by outside observers, they may well be distorted by outside values and suppositions), this practice was probably linked to other Inuit activities, such as infanticide and abandonment of the elderly: under the inexorable conditions of the Arctic tundra, those who could not contribute were undesirable. The more unproductive members of the group understood this, it is said, and thus often participated in their own demise. Suicide, according to Foulks, was also believed to be able to save the life of another, often that of a sick child. Sometimes it is true, however, that death was forced upon a sick or aged individual—see, for example, the observations of Lucian M. Turner in 1882–84 (selection #13) and Rasmussen's report on the Netsilik (selection #12).

It was commonly reported that family members assisted in the death of their relatives; sometimes this participation became highly ritualized and subject to taboo regulation—the St.

Lawrence account of Leighton and Hughes (selection #3), who did pioneering fieldwork in ethnopsychiatry in the 1940s, exemplifies this tendency. The Diomede Islander who, according to Weyer's 1928 report (selection #1), aided in the stabbing of his father demonstrates that in other Inuit groups, there was also a community and familial involvement, although at a less formalized level. Thus, among many groups, suicide possessed a strong public flavor. In many groups, hanging was the favored method, although regional variations did exist, including throwing oneself into the frigid seawater or exposing oneself to the cold.

Inuit conceptions of the afterlife may also have contributed to a readiness to commit suicide. Most Inuit groups are said to have believed in a continuance of the soul in an afterlife and in the existence of multiple destinations that a soul could achieve after death. Broadly speaking, the Inuit thought that the conditions of the soul after death depended, at least in part, on how the person died—whether by starvation, in childbirth, by sickness, or by accidental or intended violence. Violence was often seen as having a purifying effect on those that experienced it; therefore, death by violence—including suicide—often led to a placement in the better regions of the afterlife, as for instance in Hall's report of the Baffin Islanders, 1860–62 (selection #14) and Hawkes's 1914 report on the Labrador Inuit (selection #16). Turner's field study (selection #13) and Boas's report from the early 1880s (selection #7), however, demonstrate different beliefs for other Inuit groups. If, as certain Inuit groups asserted, how one dies is largely beyond one's control, the lot of the soul is largely determined by accidents of chance. Suicide, however, would be one way a person could exert more control over his or her future state, and might, therefore, present an attractive alternative.

Rasmussen's account of the intellectual culture of Iglulik Eskimo, documented during the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–24, contains a more detailed account of these religious influences (selection #10). The Moon Spirit, protector of all those who die violently and commit suicide, beckons the Inuit soul: "Come, come to me! It is not painful to die. It is only a brief moment of dizziness. It does not hurt to kill yourself." The Moon Spirit, for this Inuit group, was a benevolent deity, offering to the Eskimo the hope of a pleasant afterlife. It should be noted that in this system, the honored souls go up, while in other groups, the preferred direction is down to warmer regions.

Although most writers suspect that suicide practices among Arctic peoples are of ancient origin, some disagree. Asen Balikci (1970) has argued that the suicides reported by the early explorers among the Netsilik Eskimo were largely (but not entirely) a product of greater societal upheavals during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exacerbated by increases in emigration and the introduction of new technologies like firearms (and later intrusions such as radar stations) that disrupted traditional hunting schemes. As with accounts of all oral cultures, descriptions of native beliefs and practices are filtered through the often disapproving eyes of outside observers, although the early accounts of the Inuit are clearly not as distorted by the ideologies of colonizers and missionaries as, say, those of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca, or of various African groups. And some practices are dramatically altered in more recent times, presumably in response to European influences; see Osgood on the Ingalik, 1937 (selection #4), for responses to practices concerning abandonment of the elderly. In any case, caution is important in trying to determine the content and antiquity of beliefs and practices concerning suicide in Arctic cultures.

In contemporary times, suicide rates are high in many Inuit groups. Alcohol, unemployment, and the stress and social upheaval associated with loss of traditional cultural patterns and the challenges of adaptation to modern Alaskan and Canadian life are often blamed, though

some researchers have suggested that the high suicide rate is due at least in part to cultural traditions in pre-contact times that accepted altruistic self-destruction—as, according to Leighton and Hughes (selection #3), apparently was the case among all Eskimo from Alaska to Greenland.

ESKIMO OF DIOMEDE ISLAND

[#1] Father and Son
(Edward Moffat Weyer, 1932)

A hunter living on the Diomede Islands related to the writer how he killed his own father, at the latter's request. The old Eskimo was failing, he could no longer contribute what he thought should be his share as a member of the group; so he asked his son, then a lad about twelve years old, to sharpen the big hunting knife. Then he indicated the vulnerable spot over his heart where his son should stab him. The boy plunged the knife deep, but the stroke failed to take effect. The old father suggested with dignity and resignation, "Try it a little higher, my son." The second stab was effective, and the patriarch passed into the realm of the ancestral shades.

Women as well as men were sometimes killed. Strangling or hanging might take the place of stabbing. Always a member of the family would perform the act, in order to avoid any intimation of a blood feud.

The Eskimo has an abiding confidence that at death he will go to live in another sphere, which, although it may not be a happy hunting ground, may easily be fraught with less hardship than his earthly home. So when he commits suicide he has the composure and assurance of a civilized man who purchases a railroad ticket to another city. He meets death with sober resignation.

Source

[#1] Edward Moffat Weyer, *The Eskimos: Their Environment and Folkways* (Archon Books 1969, copyright Yale University Press, 1932), pp. 138, 248–249.

ALEUT

[#2] Are the Aleut Prone to Commit Suicide?
(I. E. P Veniaminov, 1840)

The best proof of this [their love for children] is their former custom (not general, however) of taking one's life from grief over the death of a beloved son or nephew. For example, if a son or nephew fell from a cliff, the father or uncle would also throw himself from the cliff. If the former drowned, the latter also hurled themselves into the sea, and so forth. . . .

This cannot be considered suicide. Otherwise any sacrifice performed out of love for another person may be given that name. . . .

. . . The Athin Aleuts, as savages, did not know the value of their lives. When emotionally excited they willingly deprived themselves of life. For example, they committed suicide in an excess of grief or pity over the death of their relatives—of a son, nephew, husband, wife, etc. But children never took their lives out of grief for their dead parents no matter how greatly

they may have loved them. Evidently this was their law. Sometimes the suicide was committed from disappointment at the failure of an undertaking. However, it was never done out of fear or cowardice except in cases where they saw that capture by an enemy was inevitable. Then they preferred death to slavery among their enemies or to being tortured to death by them. . . .

Those who were most devoted to the deceased, if they did not take their lives in the first explosion of grief, fasted to the point of exhaustion.

Source

[#2] I. E. P Veniaminov, *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District* (St. Petersburg: Russian-American Company, 1840), pp. 28–29, 32–33.

[#3] Notes on Eskimo Patterns of Suicide
(Alexander H. Leighton and Charles C. Hughes, 1940)

Three methods of ritual suicide were mentioned [by Yuit informant] as having existed on St. Lawrence: hanging, shooting with a rifle, and stabbing with spear or knife. Hanging was the most, and stabbing the least, common. The victim himself apparently had his choice. . . .

. . . The general procedure for suicide was the same, no matter whether the blow was self-administered or given by someone else. Once having decided to do away with himself, the individual initiated the process by asking his relatives to kill him or at least help in the suicide. As a rule they would not consent at first, but rather tried to dissuade him from his intentions. One of the St. Lawrence informants said that among their ethnic counterparts at Indian Point (Siberia) the custom was for the prospective suicide to ask three times for someone to help him, the third request being one that could not be refused. There was no indication of limits to the number of requests at Gambell.

The requirement that the prospective suicide warn his relatives of his intentions is one of the most significant aspects of the pattern, for it is here that the *group* involvement begins to emerge. Unfortunately, however, there are as yet no adequate data on whether an individual could ever "legitimately" commit suicide by himself without first warning his relatives of his plans; or whether he always had to implicate the wider social group in his demise. Probably it was the latter, however, for an informant questioned on this point by CCH on a visit to the island in 1954 said that it simply never happened that a person would go off and kill himself all alone—"always lots of people around."

. . . If the prospective suicide continued to ask among his relatives for death they finally had to agree. He would then dress himself in his house as one already dead, i.e., with his clothing turned inside out. Presently a group of relatives would arrive and carry him seated on a reindeer skin to the "Destroying Place." This was the spot where in any regular funeral some of the deceased's property was broken. There were two such places on the edge of Gambell village. Sometimes, particularly if the man were sacrificing himself to save someone else, he would walk to his death. This was considered an especially praiseworthy act.

Before his death at the Destroying Place, the prospective suicide commonly addressed his relatives, giving them advice about life, and his reflections upon parting from this world. Informants describe this speech somewhat as follows: "Sometimes he say 'You big enough. You know what you can do. Older people must teach younger ones. And after me you won't need me any more. You can defend you self.' Because our custom is: anything when we couldn't think clear, we had to come to older people." And another excerpt: "He says 'My time is up,

so I couldn't tell you anything more to what to do. So you be think you selves and you almost grown man now.'"

. . . Once the decision and arrangements for the death had been made by an individual, retraction was very difficult. The consequences of such action were not specified by an informant, but among the neighboring Chukchee it was believed that all forms of bad fortune would ensue unless the retractor made a heavy sacrifice to the "Outer Being," an important deity in the Chukchee supernatural hierarchy. It was, however, mentioned on St. Lawrence Island that in at least two cases dogs were killed after a suicide vow had been retracted, presumably in the attempt to have them substitute for the human being.

The treatment accorded the relative who acted as executioner is particularly interesting as illustrating a case in which the necessary violation of a basic and deeply held value is followed by ritual activities which seem to constitute both symbolic punishment and exorcism of any evil that might arise from the killing. The prevailing attitude seems to have been, as one informant expressed it, "No one likes to kill anyone; people usually kill themselves when they want death." This informant himself put forward the suggestion that the treatment of the killer was some form of punishment.

The executioner was confined to his or her house for a period of twenty days. During this time he was not allowed to go outside for fresh air; he could not change his clothes; and he could not do any sort of work in the house. He always wore his clothes with the hair turned inward, and his head and eyebrows were shaved without water. A small net made of baleen was placed over his head or parka hood. He could not wash himself nor use his fingernails for scratching, though he was allowed to use a stick or comb for the latter purpose. For picking up meat he had to use a pointed knife rather than his fingers. After this initial twenty-day confinement, he was free to go outside, but still could not engage in constructive labor for another (unspecified) period of time. . . .

. . . When death was by hanging, several relatives participated in holding the post, and in raising and lowering the deerskin. It was apparently felt that in such an operation no single individual was responsible for the death and as a result none had to undergo the severe treatment accorded a person who alone caused a death. It is likely that they nevertheless had to carry out some ritual limitations of activity, similar to those described above for ordinary mourning. Adequate information on this point is unfortunately lacking.

The commonest reason given for suicide was suffering due to physical sickness. A second cause was prolonged grief over the death of a loved one; another was pervasive despondency without apparent cause. The latter, as described by the informants, seemed to be very similar to the clinical depressions known in our culture. . . .

The above motives are found in other Eskimo groups. On St. Lawrence there was one additional reason not found in these groups nor in the Chukchee culture, as far as the evidence at hand indicates. This was the belief that a man, by giving his own life, could thereby save the life of an ill son or grandson. . . . In the words of one informant, "My own parents, father and brother (sic), they been hang. I know my own father very well that time. We was both sick, myself and my father same time. Maybe my father was think 'If I die myself maybe he (son) get well.'" And a similar case at Indian Point was related: "Seems to me he wasn't very sick. He shot because he want to save son who was sick. Shot by own son (other son). . . . He was talking aloud before shot him. Say, 'I want to be shot because I want my son to live so I take his place to die.'". . .

. . . Usually it was old men who committed suicide, but occasionally elderly women and people in the prime of life did so too. No clear-cut information on patterns of abandoning the aged (which, if practiced, might have increased the prevalence of suicides, especially among old women) is available, although the practice probably did exist. When it was a case of saving somebody else, it was often the able-bodied men in their most productive years who sacrificed themselves. Those who committed suicide were thought very brave and courageous; they, along with people who were murdered, were said to go to heaven—to a "place where they would be happier." It was particularly proper, according to one of the early ethnographers, for what the St. Lawrence Islanders termed an "athletic man" (i.e., the strong, able, aggressive individual who dominated his fellows) to kill himself rather than die a natural death. One reason for this may be, as Margaret Lantis has suggested, that the prestige and high social evaluation accorded a good hunter in this culture was greatly enhanced by this ultimate act of killing—the killing of oneself. Thus, rather than suffer the social decline concomitant with waning physical powers, the athletic man and hunter often chose to destroy himself while still enjoying a large measure of prestige.

Source

[#3] Alexander H. Leighton and Charles C. Hughes, "Notes on Eskimo Patterns of Suicide," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 11(4): 327–335 (winter 1955), with data collected from Yuit informants on St. Lawrence Island, summer 1940.

INGALIK

[#4] Suicide as Shameful or Insane
(Cornelius Osgood, 1937)

Another cause of death is suicide. To kill oneself is considered a shameful act, but it may be done nonetheless. The corpse of such a person receives special treatment. There is no regular funeral and the body is put on top of some other grave. Even the spirit is destined for a distinctive afterworld.

A woman who has decided to take her own life ideally bathes and puts on new clothes. Females apparently prefer to die by hanging. . . .

Sometimes an old man will strangle himself with a line, but men who are not old more often drive a knife or arrow into the heart. A man would not drown himself, as most rationalize that this method is painful. For whatever reason and however it is done, suicide is considered a form of insanity.

The Ingalik take an unfavorable view of the abandonment of individuals where such an act leads inevitably to their death. As previously mentioned, in the desperate times of starvation, abandonment does take place, but then no choice is considered to be involved. Also old people are occasionally left behind in a winter village if they have no one to look after them. Such unfortunates may strangle themselves. However, should healthy, active members of a family remove to their summer camp leaving relatives helpless, they would gain a very bad reputation for doing so. Ingalik claim that when traveling they will not abandon living people for any reason. If they did so, others would laugh at them and simply say that they had killed the individuals that they had left.

Source

[#4] Cornelius Osgood, *Ingalik Social Culture*. Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 53, field date 1937 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 148.

COPPER ESKIMO

[#5] Death Taboos
(Knud Rasmussen 1921–24)

. . . People who desire to put an end to their life should do so while others are looking on. Consequently it often happens that they get one of their relatives to strangle them. The cause may either be sorrow or sickness. People who wish to take their life in secret must themselves make a thong fast to the roof of the snow hut by means of a hole and a bar placed across it on the outside, and then seek death by hanging.

Nothing is known as to whether people who take their own life meet with any special fate after death: it is believed that they go where they would otherwise have gone.

If the death taboo is not observed the soul becomes . . . an evil spirit.

Source

[#5] Knud Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Copper Eskimos (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1932), pp. 46–47.

[#6] Suicide as Rare
(Diamond Jenness, 1913–18)

The majority of the natives are extremely curious, although a few of them keep this feeling fairly under control. They like to pick up and examine everything, to turn a thing over and see what is inside. . . . Just as among Europeans, however, there were very many different types. Some were very timid and alarmed by anything they could not understand, such as the phonograph or the magnetic needle, others were bold and inquisitive, or sly and cunning, and a few, a very few, frank and straightforward. The majority were cheerful and light-hearted, inclined to be talkative and, in some cases, even garrulous. Their gay and care-free natures make suicide an extremely rare occurrence; in fact I do not remember hearing of more than one case, and that was due not to any morbid weariness of life, but to terror of the revenge that might be exacted for a crime that the man had committed.

Source

[#6] D. Jenness, *Report of the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913–18*, Vol. XII: The Life of the Copper Eskimos (Ottawa: F. A. Acland, 1922), p. 233.

ESKIMO OF CUMBERLAND SOUND

[#7] Man's Two Souls: The Afterlife
(Franz Boas, 1883–84)

The Eskimo believe that man has two souls. One of these stays with the body, and may enter temporarily the body of a child which is given the name of the departed. The other soul goes to one of the lands of the souls. Of these there are several. There are three heavens, one above another, of which the highest is the brightest and best. Those who die by violence go to the lowest heaven. Those who die by disease go to Sedna's house first, where they stay for a year. Sedna restores their souls to full health, and then she sends them up to the second heaven. They become inhabitants of *Omiktu*, in which place there are many whales. It is not quite certain that the second heaven and *Omiktu* are the same, as it is also stated that only the lighter souls that leave Sedna's house ascend to the second heaven. Those who die by drowning go to the third heaven. Their souls are very strong and healthy. People who commit suicide go to a place in which it is always dark, called "*Kumetoon*," and where they go about with their tongues lolling. Women who have had premature births go to Sedna's abode, and stay in Alipā'q, the lowest world, which is under the sea, and not far from Sedna's house. It is said that some souls go to *Tukeychwen*, a place of which no full description is given.

Source

[#7] Franz Boas, "The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay," *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. XV, 1907, p. 130.

CARIBOU ESKIMO

[#8] Moral Rights, Social Obligations
(Kaj Birket-Smith, 1921–24)

Life is harsh towards the Caribou Eskimos and old people are rare. . . .

Nor is it seldom that old people or persons suffering from a disease come to the conclusion that life is more unbearable than death and, according to Eskimo ideas, they have the moral right to commit suicide. Suicide is not rare, and it is the duty of pious children to assist their parents in committing it. As a rule the method is hanging. But there is no doubt that it also happens that a sick person is left to die, either out of fear that the other will be unable to pull through when he is a burden to the family, or simply out of fear of coming into contact with death.

The result of the natural influence of age is that the word of middle-aged or elderly men—but only so long as they still have their strength—carries most weight, although less directly, perhaps, than indirectly by force of example. Old people who are no longer in possession of all their faculties gradually lose their influence and respect. Their life is often a bitter one. Even though they are treated with kindness, they feel themselves in the way and suicide is not uncommon. On the other hand I do not think that nowadays—as undoubtedly was the case formerly—they run any risk of being killed. Although they might be deserted.

Source

[#8] Kaj Birket-Smith, The Caribou Eskimos: Material and Social Life and the Cultural Position (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24) (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1929), pp. 258, 300.

NETSILIK ESKIMO

[#9] Famine; On the Treatment of the Aged (Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

. . . In seasons when hunting is bad they have to move incessantly from place to place, and the winter becomes a hard one, not only for the hunters themselves but especially for all the old people. The treatment of the aged, of course, varies with the individual. Here, as everywhere, there are helpful and sympathetic, or hardhearted sons and sons-in-law, and fate of the old people lies in their hands. A removal from one hunting place to the other is like a whole migration, on which men and woman have to carry along everything they possess. True, this is not much, but when clothing, sleeping skins and household utensils are piled up on the small, often miserable sledges, there is at any rate no room for people to sit. Then in a long procession the sledges move off over the ice to find a good camp with deep drifts for building snow huts. Men and women have to help the dogs to draw the loads, and then when they arrive at a place where good hunting may be expected, they stop and pitch camp. These removals are slow processes. Children who can walk must be able to keep up with the sledges. The only ones who sometimes have difficulty are the old. Worn-out men or women; bent with rheumatism they come plodding behind, and no matter how slowly the main body moves, they are usually unable to keep up but only arrive at the camp when the snow houses are finished.

I made exhaustive enquiries as to the treatment of the aged, and the only case of heartlessness that I came across was that of an old woman by name Kigtaq. She was the mother of a woman named Terigssaq who was married to Arfeq. When they moved from camp to camp she was often left out on the ice in midwinter, clad only in a thin inner jacket and no thick, warm outer coat. Even in bad weather she often had to sleep out on the ice as she had not caught up with the others: but, as they said to me, "she was not dead yet and life was still sweet to her." When I passed Matty Island she was on the long journey to Lord Mayor Bay to spend the spring and summer in that region.

I took up this case of Kigtaq and asked whether it was not thought wicked that more care was not taken of an old woman. To this Samik answered: "No one here among us wishes harm to old people. We ourselves might be old some day. Perhaps there are those among us who think Arfeq might take more care of his mother-in-law, particularly by giving her better clothes. But others excuse Arfeq, in that he has been so unlucky in his hunting that he has barely been able to procure furs for his wife and his children, and people think he must first and foremost attend to them; for not only are they more closely related to him, but they have their lives before them and they may live long, whereas there is no future for an old worn-out woman. Then again there are others who think that Arfeq should allow his mother-in-law to ride on his sledge, or at any rate go back for her when he has built his snow hut, while others say that he only has two dogs

and with his wife has to help to drag his sledge from place to place. And if he has to be at the breathing holes next morning at the proper time to secure food he can not travel backwards and forwards between the old and the new camp to salvage an old woman. He has the choice between helping one who is at deaths door anyhow, and allowing his wife and children to starve. This is how it is, and we see no wickedness in it. Perhaps it is more remarkable that old Kigtaq, now that she is no longer able to fend for herself, still hangs on as a burden to her children and grandchildren. For our custom up here is that all old people who can do no more, and whom death will not take, help death to take them.

And they do this not merely to be rid of a life that is no longer a pleasure, but also to relieve their nearest relations of the trouble they give them."

. . . A man is fond of life as long as he is well, but as soon as life becomes a burden to him, either on account of age or sickness, they believe they have the right to seek death themselves. Hanging is the method chosen, and it is a common thing for the relatives of the old or sick person concerned to make everything ready for the suicide.

Sources

[#9] Knud Rasmussen, *The Netsilik Eskimos: Social Life and Spiritual Culture (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1931), pp. 138, 143–144, 507.

IGLULIK ESKIMO

[#10] The Moon Spirit
(Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

The Moon Spirit, Aningâp os Tarqip inua, lives with his sister Seqineq in a double house (a house with two apartments but one common entrance) up in the land of the dead in the sky, the same which is called Udlormiut or Land of Day. Human beings who perish by drowning in the sea or in a lake, go to dwell with the moon; so also those who are killed by their fellows openly or unawares, those who take their own lives out of weariness or because they are old, and finally, all women dying in childbirth. Human beings going up into the sky enter at once into the eternal hunting grounds, and do not have to purify their minds by a year of penance, as with those who go down to the Sea Spirit. All are loth to go down to her, for fear of the ill treatment meted out to them by her father Isarrataitsoq. . . .

The Moon Spirit is one of the greatest regulating powers of the universe which is not feared. Knowing the view of the East Green landers, who regard the Moon Spirit as the most terrible of the punitive deities watching over the deeds of men, I enquired particularly about this point, but was everywhere informed that no one feared the Moon Spirit, only the Sea Spirit was to be feared, and especially her father. The Moon Spirit, on the other hand, is the only good and well-intentioned spirit known, and when he does intervene, it is often more for guidance than for punishment.

People in danger can often hear him calling out:

"Come, come to me! It is not painful to die. It is only a brief moment of dizziness. It does not hurt to kill yourself."

Thus the moon sometimes calls, and it is thus also regarded more particularly as the protector of those perishing by accident or suicide. . . .

Source

[#10] Knud Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1929), pp. 73–74.

[#11] Death, and Life in the Land of the Dead (Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

. . . No Eskimo fears death in itself, for all are convinced that it is merely the transition to a new and better form of life. But as mentioned elsewhere, there is also this mystery connected with the soul, that as soon as death has deprived it of the body, it can turn upon the living as an evil and ruthless spirit. The soul of a good and peaceable man may suddenly turn into an evil spirit. There is therefore much intricate taboo associated with death. . . .

. . . After death, there are two different places to which one may pass either up into heaven to the Udlormiut, or People of Day: their land lies in the direction of dawn, and is the same as the Land of the Moon Spirit. The other place to which the dead may come lies down under the sea. It is a narrow strip of land, with sea on either side: and the inhabitants are there called Qimiujârmiut: "the dwellers in the narrow land." The immigrant Netilingmiut call them Atlêt: "those lowest down," for they live in a world below the world in which we live.

Here also dwells the great Sea Spirit Takánakapsâluk.

As already mentioned, persons dying by violence, whether through no fault of their own or by their own hand, pass Udlormiut: those dying a natural death, by disease go to Qimiujârmiut. Life in the Land of the Dead is described later under Shamans. It is pleasant both in the Land of Day and in the Narrow Land. . . . Some hold that all dead persons, whatever the manner of their death, go first to Takánakapsâluk, who then alone determiners where they are to dwell; those who have lived a good life without breach of taboo are sent on at once to the Land of Day, whereas those who have failed to observe the ancient rules of life are detained in her house to expiate their misdeeds, before being allowed to proceed to the Narrow Land. The dead suffer no hardship, wherever they may go, but most prefer to nevertheless to dwell in the Land of the Day, where the pleasures appear to be without limit. . . .

Anyone having relatives among the Udlormiut and wishing to join them after death, can avoid being sent to the Qimiujármiut: the survivors must then lay the body out on the ice instead of burying it on land. Blocks of snow are then set out round the body, not stones, as on land. Often indeed, a small snow hut is built up over the body as it lies. But it is not everyone who can reckon on their surviving relatives' or neighbours' taking all this trouble, and in order to make sure of coming to the Udlormiut, the best way is to arrange one's death oneself. This was done not long since by an old woman named Inuguk, of Iglulik. Her son had perished while out in his kayak, and as she did not live in the same village herself, the news did not reach her until the winter was well advanced. She was old and without other relatives, and could not be certain that others would comply with her wishes when once she was dead; she therefore cut a hole for herself in the ice of a big lake and drowned herself there in order to join her son.

Another example is likewise recorded from Iglulik: an old woman was frozen to death during a severe winter with scarcity of food. When her son learned the news, he went out one cold winter's night and lay down naked in the snow and was frozen to death himself. This he did because he was very fond of his mother, and wished to live with her in the Land of the Dead.

These suicides, however, had some special reason for taking their own lives. The Eskimos' fearlessness of death is more powerfully illustrated in the case of the many old men and women who ended their lives by hanging themselves. This is done probably not only because the Moon Spirit says that the whole thing is but a moment's dizziness, but possibly also because of an ancient belief that death by violence has a purifying effect.". . .

Source

[#11] Knud Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1929), pp. 92–97.

[#12] Those Who Were Left Behind
(Knud Rasmussen, 1921–24)

The communism which necessarily prevails in Eskimo society in order that all can manage to exist renders it a duty for the family to care for all helpless persons; among such are reckoned fatherless children, widows or old men and women who on account of age are no longer able to keep up with the rest on the constant hunting expeditions. In the absence of immediate relatives, the village as a whole is charged with the care of those who are unable to provide for themselves. But although such might often be inconceivably modest in their demands, they might sometimes be left to their fate. This applies more especially to old women, who could no longer render any useful service. Often pure heartlessness was the cause, but it might just as often be the severity of the struggle to make ends meet, which forced the head of a household to restrict the number of mouths to be fed, in times of scarcity, when despite all efforts he could not even procure food enough for those nearest of kin. Orphan children were blocked up in snow huts and left there, buried alive. They were called "mato'rufät": "those who have been covered up." Old and worn out folk would be left behind on the road when unable to keep up with the rest on a journey: one day the old creature would lag behind, and be left, in the track of the sledges, no one troubling to fetch the laggard in to camp when the snow huts were built. These were called "qimatät": "those who were left behind." Sometimes also, the party would simply neglect to take them along when first setting out from the old site, and they might then freeze or starve to death—often a lingering death, unless they chose to hang themselves rather then suffer so long.—But though the severe conditions of life were responsible for these cruel customs, it was nevertheless always reckoned a shameful thing to be guilty of such heartlessness. And the stories, which have always a moral touch, and point very clearly the difference between right and wrong, generally provide some miraculous form of rescue for such unfortunates, with a cruel and ignominious death for those who abandoned them. . . .

Source

[#12] Knud Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1929), pp. 159–160.

HUDSON BAY INUIT

[#13] Desertion of Old Women (in Archive only)
(Lucian M. Turner, 1882–84)

ESKIMO OF BAFFIN ISLAND

[#14] Theological Questions
(Charles Francis Hall, 1860–62)

. . . The Innuits believe in a heaven and a hell, though their notions as to what is to constitute their happiness or misery hereafter are varied as on meets with different communities. Tookoolito says:

"My people think this way: *Kood-le-par-mi-ung* (heaven) is upward. Every body happy there. All the time light; no snow, no ice, no storms; always pleasant; no trouble; never tired; sing and play all the time—all this continue with out end.

"*Ad-le-par-me-un* (hell) is downward. Always dark there. No sun; trouble there continually; snow flying all the time; terrible storms; cold, very cold; and a great deal of ice there. All who go there must always remain.

"All Innuits who have been good go to Koodleparmiung; that is, who have been kind to the poor and hungry—all who have been happy while living on this earth. Any one who has been killed by accident, or who has committed suicide, certainly goes to the happy place.

"All Innuits who have been bad—that is, unkind one to another—all who have been unhappy while on this earth, will go to Adleparmeun. If an Innuit kill another because he is mad at him, he certainly will go to Adleparmeun."

Source

[#14] Captain Charles Francis Hall, *Life with the Eskimaux* (expedition 1860–62) (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1865).

[#15] Tribal Life (in Archive only)
(Julian Bilby, 1923)

LABRADOR ESKIMO

[#16] Respect for the Aged
(Ernest W. Hawkes, 1914)

The aged are treated with great respect, and the word of the old men and women is final. The Eskimo say that they have lived a long time and understand things in general better. They also feel that in the aged is embodied the wisdom of their ancestors. This does not prevent them, however, from putting the old folks out of the way, when life has become a burden to them, but

the act is usually done in accordance with the wishes of the persons concerned and is thought to be a proof of devotion. . . .

Source

[#16] E. W. Hawkes, *The Labrador Eskimo* (Canada Department of Mines, Geological Survey, Memoir 91) (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1916), pp. 117–118, 136–137.

GREENLAND ESKIMO

[#17] The Old Woman and the Cliff (Fridtjof Nansen, 1893)

The conceptions of good and evil in this world are exceedingly divergent. As an example, let me cite the case of the Eskimo girl who, when Niels Egede spoke to her of love of God and her neighbour, said to him: 'I have given proof of love for my neighbour. Once an old woman who was ill, but could not die, offered to pay me if I would lead her to the top of the steep cliff from which our people have always thrown themselves when they are tired of living; but I, having ever loved my neighbours, led her thither without payment, and cast her over the cliff.' Egede told her that this was ill done, and that she had killed a fellow-creature. 'She said no; but that she was filled with pity for her, and cried after she had fallen over.' Are we to call this a good or an evil deed?

Source

[#17] Fridtjof Nansen, *Eskimo Life*, tr. William Archer (London: Longmans, Green, 1893), p. 170.

Additional Sources

Fridtjof Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, two vols. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911); Tryggvy J. Oleson, *Early Voyages and Northern Approaches, 1000–1632* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963); Edward F. Foulks, *The Arctic Hysterias of the North Alaskan Eskimo*, Anthropological Studies No. 10 (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1972); Wendell H. Oswalt, *Eskimos and Explorers* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp, 1979).

EDUARD VON HARTMANN (1842–1906)

from *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (expanded in Archive)

Born in Berlin in 1842, Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann initially intended to embark on a military career. However, plagued by a problem with his knee, he turned to philosophy, obtaining a doctorate from the University of Rostock.

Hartmann wrote voluminously, producing some 12,000 pages, later published in selected form in 10 volumes. Hartmann's works include historical and critical works (among them studies of Kant [q.v.], Schelling, Schopenhauer [q.v.], Hegel [q.v.], and extended polemics against Nietzsche [q.v.]), popular works, and systematic works including self-criticism originally published anonymously. His wife Agnes Taubert was co-author of the work Pessimism and its Opponents *(Berlin 1873). Hartmann's thought is based on a metaphysics of the absolute associated with Hegel and Schopenhauer.*

Hartmann's first and most celebrated work Philosophy of the Unconscious *(Berlin, 1869), selections from a chapter of which is presented here, develops an extensive and unique treatment of universal suicide. It is heavily influenced by Buddhist thought. Hartmann posits three stages of illusion to which humanity is subject, around which* Philosophy of the Unconscious *is structured: (1) that "happiness is considered as having been actually attained at the present stage of the world's development, accordingly attainable by the individual of today in his earthly life"—this illusion is in Hartmann's view exhibited particularly prominently in the ancient world and in childhood; (2) that "happiness is conceived attainable by the individual in a transcendent life after death," an illusion characteristic of the Middle Ages and youth; and (3) that "happiness [is] relegated to the future of the world," an illusion associated with modern times and adulthood. Hartmann opposes the suicide of the individual as selfish and ethically reprehensible, but he argues for the release of the Unconscious from its sufferings, when humanity—all humanity, everywhere—unites in the collective understanding that by willing its own nonexistence, the world-process will cease. Future human existence is thus precluded. Humankind and the world in general will thus be released from the misery of existence once and for all in the "cosmic-*universal *negation of will as the act that forms the end of the process, as the* last moment, after *which there shall be no more volition, activity, or time."*

Hartmann died in Berlin in 1906.

Source

Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, tr. William Chatterton Coupland, Vol III. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1893, pp. 98–100, 120–142; footnotes and internal references deleted.

from PHILOSOPHY OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

. . . [F]rom the point of view of the ego of the individual the denial of the will or forsaking of the world and renunciation of life is the *only rational course*. . . . It is . . . an infallible specific for an over-balanced egoism. Whoever has once realized the preponderating pain that every individual must endure, with or without knowledge, in his life, will soon contemn and scorn the standpoint of the self-preserving and would-be enjoying—in a word, self-*affirming* ego. He who has come to hold lightly his egoism and his ego will hardly insist upon the same as the absolute pivot on which everything must turn, will rate personal sacrifice less highly than usual, will less reluctantly accept the result of an investigation which exhibits the Ego as a mere *phenomenon* of a Being that for all individuals is one and *the same*.

Contempt of the world and life is the easiest path to self-denial; *only by this path* has a morality of self-denial, like the Christian and Buddhist, been historically possible. In these fruits which it bears for facilitating the infinitely difficult self-renunciation lies the immense and hardly to be sufficiently estimated *ethical value of Pessimism*.

[T]his idea is just as unsubstantial and brain-created a phantom as, for instance, the Idea of honour or of right, and that the only being which answers to the idea of the inner cause of my activity is something *non-individual*, the Only Unconscious, which therefore answers just as well to Peter's idea of his ego as Paul's idea of his ego. On this deepest of all bases rests only the esoteric ethics of Buddhism, *not* the Christian ethics. If one has firmly and thoughtfully made this cognition his own, that *one and the same Being* feels my and thy pain, my and thy pleasure, only accidentally through the intervention of different brains, then is the exclusive egoism *radically broken*, that is only *shaken*, though deeply shaken, by contempt of the world and of life. . . .

There occurs, namely at the end of each of the preceding stages of the illusion, and before the discovery of the next, the voluntary surrender of individual existence—*suicide*, as a necessary consequence. Both the life-weary heathen, and the Christian, despairing at once of the world and his faith, must in consistency do away with themselves. . . .

The Goal of Evolution and the Significance of Consciousness (Transition to Practical Philosophy)

. . . The question still remains open whether consciousness is really *ultimate end*, therefore also self-end, or whether it again serves only *another* end?

The endeavour after happiness is the most deeply rooted impulse, is *the essence of the will itself seeking satisfaction*. And yet . . . the hope of its fulfilment is an illusion; and that its consequence is the pain of disillusion, its truth the misery of existence; have taught us that the progressive evolution of consciousness has the negative result of gradually perceiving the illusory character of that hope, the folly of that endeavour. Between the will striving after absolute satisfaction and felicity and the intelligence emancipating itself more and more from the impulse through consciousness a *deeply pervading antagonism* cannot therefore be mistaken. The higher and more perfectly consciousness develops in the course of the world-process, the more is it *emancipated* from the blind vassalage with which it at first followed the irrational will; the more it *sees through* the illusions aroused in it by impulse for the cloaking of this irrationality, the more does it assume a hostile position in opposition to the will struggling for positive happiness, in which it combats it step by step in the course of history, breaks through the ramparts of illusions behind which it is entrenched one after the other, and will not have drawn its last consequences until it has completely *annihilated* it, in that after the destruction of every illusion only the knowledge remains that *every* volition leads to unblessedness, and only *renunciation* to the *best attainable* state, *painlessness*. . . .

. . . there follows from volition always more pain than pleasure; that therefore the will that wills *happiness attains* the contrary, *unhappiness*; therefore *most irrationally* and for its proper torment digs its teeth into its own flesh, and yet on account of its unreason can be taught by no experience to desist from its unblessed willing. From these three premises it necessarily follows that consciousness, so far as it attains the necessary clearness, activity, and fullness, must also more and more perceive, and accordingly contest to the last, the irrationality of volition and endeavour after happiness . . . if, lastly, it lies *in the notion* of consciousness to have for result

the emancipation of the intellect from the will, the combating and final annihilation of willing, should it be any longer doubtful that the all-knowing Unconscious thinking end and means at once has created consciousness *for that very reason, to redeem the will from the unblessedness of its willing*, from which it cannot redeem itself,—that the real end of the world-process, to which consciousness serves as final means, *is this, to realize the greatest possible attainable state of happiness, namely, that of painlessness?*

We have seen that in the existing world everything is arranged in the wisest and best manner, and that it may be looked upon as the best of all possible worlds, but that nevertheless it is thoroughly wretched, and worse than none at all. . . .

The main point of this theory consists in the assumption that the individual, in virtue of the individual cognition of the misery of existence and the unreason of volition, is able to cause his personal willing to cease, and thereby *to be individually annihilated after death*, or, as Buddhism expressed it, to be no more born again. . . .

. . . One of the many rays or individual objectifications of the One Will, that which related to this individual, would be withdrawn from its actuality, and this man be dead. That is, however, *no more and no less* than happens at *every* decease, no matter to what cause it is due, and to the Only Will the consequences would have been the same if a tile had killed that man; it continues after, as before, with unenfeebled energy, with undiminished avidity, to lay hold of life wherever it finds it and can lay hold of it; for to acquire experience and become wiser by experience is impossible to it, and *it cannot* suffer a quantitative abatement of its essence or its substance through the withdrawal of a merely one-sided direction of action. Therefore the endeavour after *individual* negation of the will is *just as foolish and useless*, nay, still more foolish, than *suicide*, because it only attains the same end more slowly and painfully: abolition of *this* appearance without altering the essence, which for every abolished individual phenomenon is ceaselessly objectified in new individuals. . . . What would it avail, *e.g.*, if all mankind should die out gradually by sexual continence? The world as such would still continue to exist, and would find itself substantially in the same position as immediately before the origin of the first man; nay, the Unconscious would even be compelled to employ the next opportunity *to fashion a new man or a similar type*, and the whole misery would begin over again.

. . . Here we have reached the point where the philosophy of the Unconscious gains a principle which alone can form the basis of practical philosophy. The truth of the first stage of the illusion was despair of existence here; the truth of the second stage of the illusion was despair also of the hereafter; the truth of the third stage of the illusion was the absolute resignation of positive happiness. All these points of view are merely *negative;* practical philosophy and life, however, need a *positive* stand-point, and this is *the complete devotion of the personality to the world-process for the sake of its goal, the general world-redemption*.

. . . The result of the last three chapters is, then, as follows. Volition has by its nature an excess of pain for its consequence. Volition, which posits the "That" of the world, thus condemns the world, no matter *how* it may be constituted, to torment. To obtain redemption from this unblessedness of volition, which the all-wisdom or the logical element of the unconscious Idea cannot directly effect, because it is itself in bondage to the Will, the logical in the Unconscious procures the emancipation of the Idea through consciousness in that it thus dissipates the will in individuation, so that its separate tendencies turn against one another. The logical principle guides the world-process most wisely to the goal of the greatest possible evolution of consciousness, which being attained, consciousness suffices to hurl back the total actual volition into nothingness, by which the *process* and the *world ceases*, and ceases indeed without any residuum whatever whereby the process might be continued.

The logical element therefore ensures that the world is a best possible world, such a one, namely, as attains redemption, not one whose torment is perpetuated endlessly.

WILLIAM JAMES (1842–1910)

from *The Principles of Psychology* (expanded in Archive)
from *Is Life Worth Living?* (expanded in Archive)

The son of the eccentric American philosopher Henry James, Sr., who was influenced by Swedenborgianism and Fourierism, and the brother of Henry James, the eminent novelist and literary critic, William James became a major figure in both philosophy and psychology. In philosophy, he was one of the founders of the school known as Pragmatism; in psychology, he led the movement of functionalism. His childhood was characterized by irregular schooling, respect for opposing ideas (developed in discussions with his father at the family dinner table), and frequent travel. After an unsatisfying attempt to study art, he attended Harvard, where he studied chemistry, physiology, and medicine. While still in school, he served as assistant to the famous naturalist Louis Agassiz on an expedition to the Amazon.

His health failing, James returned to medical school and in 1867–68 studied in Germany; he also read extensively in philosophy and experimental psychology. While in Germany, he experienced a breakdown and contemplated suicide. He received his M.D. in 1869, but was unable to practice as a result of an extended illness that kept him a semi-invalid and confined him to home until 1872. His recovery began with reading Charles Renouvier on free will: James decided that "my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will." That year he began to teach physiology at Harvard. In 1878, he married and his health improved; it was from this point on that his original thinking began in earnest.

James published The Principles of Psychology *in 1890; its scope grew to be far beyond its conception as a textbook of physiological psychology. In this work, he established a functional viewpoint, thus assimilating mental science to those biological disciplines which viewed thinking and knowledge as tools in the struggle for survival. James defended the idea of free will, yet outlined the influences of physical processes upon mental operations. In* The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy *(1897), he viewed the existence of God as established by the record of religious experience, often occurring during times of crisis. Freedom of action is made possible by a looseness in the connection between past and future events, in a way analogous to Darwin's notion of spontaneous variation. James's Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, though delayed several years by further health problems, were published as* The Varieties of Religious Experience *(1902) and became popular for their discussions of science and the religious experience.*

Near the turn of the century, James turned to philosophy and formulated the philosophical method of Pragmatism. Building on the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, James argued that the meaning and

veracity of all ideas are a function of the consequences that result from them. Pragmatism flowered, and James achieved great fame in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in England; it is often said that from James, "a new vitality flowed into the veins of American philosophers." After several years of lecturing, teaching, and further writing though in deteriorating health, James died in New Hampshire in 1910.

In this selection from The Principles of Psychology, *James argues that suicide for "positive" wholly altruistic motives is impossible, since one inevitably expects to be rewarded for the act. Suicides with "negative" motivations (e.g., fear, retreat) can be genuine, though suicidal frenzy is itself pathological. In the essay "Is Life Worth Living?" (1896), James outlines a way to help overcome the pessimism that leads to suicide. He argues that only a distrust of life can invalidate the value that endurance might bestow upon it; life is "what we make of it."*

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from THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY

Yet still the emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest *possible* judging companion, if such companion there be. This self is the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent Me which I seek. This judge is God, the Absolute Mind, the 'Great Companion.' We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment, a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given us why we should. But in all this very little is said of the reason why we *do* pray, which is simply that we cannot *help* praying. It seems probable that, in spite of all that 'science' may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* in an ideal world.

All progress in the social Self is the substitution of higher tribunals for lower; this ideal tribunal is the highest; and most men, either continually or occasionally, carry a reference to it in their breast. The humblest outcast on this earth can feel himself to be real and valid by means of this higher recognition. And, on the other hand, for most of us, a world with no such inner refuge when the outer social self failed and dropped from us would be the abyss of horror. I say 'for most of us,' because it is probable that individuals differ a good deal in the degree in which they are haunted by this sense of an ideal spectator. It is a much more essential part of the consciousness of some men than of others. Those who have the most of it are possibly the most *religious* men. But I am sure that even those who say they are altogether without it deceive themselves, and really have it in some degree. Only a non-gregarious animal could be completely without it. Probably no one can make

sacrifices for 'right,' without to some degree personifying the principle of right for which the sacrifice is made, and expecting thanks from it. *Complete* social unselfishness, in other words, can hardly exist; *complete* social suicide hardly occur[s] to a man's mind. Even such texts as Job's "Though He slay me yet will I trust Him," or Marcus Aurelius's "If gods hate me and my children, there is a reason for it," can least of all be cited to prove the contrary. For beyond all doubt Job revelled in the thought of Jehovah's recognition of the worship after the slaying should have been done; and the Roman emperor felt sure the Absolute Reason would not be all indifferent to his acquiescence in the gods' dislike. The old test of piety, "Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?" was probably never answered in the affirmative except by those who felt sure in their heart of hearts that God would 'credit' them with their willingness, and set more store by them thus if in His unfathomable scheme He had not damned them at all. All this about the impossibility of suicide is said on the supposition of *positive* motives. When possessed by the emotion of *fear*, however, we are in a *negative* state of mind; that is, our desire is limited to the mere banishing of something, without regard to what shall take its place. In this state of mind there can unquestionably be genuine thoughts, and genuine acts, of suicide, spiritual and social, as well as bodily. Anything, *anything*, at such times, so as to escape and not to be! But such conditions of suicidal frenzy are pathological in their nature and run dead against everything that is regular in the life of the Self in man.

from IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

"It ends soon, and never more can be," "Lo, you are free to end it when you will,"—these verses flow truthfully from the melancholy Thomson's pen, and are in truth a consolation for all to whom, as to him, the world is far more like a steady den of fear than a continual fountain of delight. That life is *not* worth living the whole army of suicides declare,—an army whose roll-call, like the famous evening gun of the British army, follows the sun round the world and never terminates. We, too, as we sit here in our comfort, must 'ponder these things' also, for we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share. The plainest intellectual integrity,—nay, more, the simplest manliness and honor, forbid us to forget their case.

To come immediately to the heart of my theme, then, what I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance, "You may end it when you will." What reasons can we plead that may render such a brother (or sister) willing to take up the burden again? Ordinary Christians, reasoning with would-be suicides, have little to offer them beyond the usual negative, "Thou shalt not." God alone is master of life and death, they say, and it is a blasphemous act to anticipate his absolving hand. But can *we* find nothing richer or more positive than this, no reflections to urge whereby the suicide may actually see, and in all sad seriousness feel, that in spite of adverse appearances even for him life is still worth living? There are suicides and suicides (in the United States about three thousand of them every year), and I must frankly confess that with perhaps the majority of these my suggestions are impotent to deal. Where suicide is the result of insanity

or sudden frenzied impulse, reflection is impotent to arrest its headway: and cases like these belong to the ultimate mystery of evil. . . .

. . . We are familiar enough in this community with the spectacle of persons exulting in their emancipation from belief in the God of their ancestral Calvinism,—him who made the garden and the serpent, and preappointed the eternal fires of hell. Some of them have found humaner gods to worship, others are simply converts from all theology; but, both alike, they assure us that to have got rid of the sophistication of thinking they could feel any reverence or duty toward that impossible idol gave a tremendous happiness to their souls. Now, to make an idol of the spirit of nature, and worship it, also leads to sophistication; and in souls that are religious and would also be scientific the sophistication breeds a philosophical melancholy, from which the first natural step of escape is the denial of the idol; and with the downfall of the idol, whatever lack of positive joyousness may remain, there comes also the downfall of the whimpering and cowering mood. With evil simply taken as such, men can make short work, for their relations with it then are only practical. It looms up no longer so spectrally, it loses all its haunting and perplexing significance, as soon as the mind attacks the instances of it singly, and ceases to worry about their derivation from the 'one and only Power.'

Here, then, on this stage of mere emancipation from monistic superstition, the would-be suicide may already get encouraging answers to his question about the worth of life. There are in most men instinctive springs of vitality that respond healthily when the burden of metaphysical and infinite responsibility rolls off. The certainty that you now *may* step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous, is itself an immense relief. The thought of suicide is now no longer a guilty challenge and obsession.

"This little life is all we must endure;
The grave's most holy peace is ever sure,"—

says Thomson; adding, "I ponder these thoughts, and they comfort me." Meanwhile we can always stand it for twenty-four hours longer, if only to see what to-morrow's newspaper will contain, or what the next postman will bring.

But far deeper forces than this mere vital curiosity are arousable, even in the pessimistically-tending mind; for where the loving and admiring impulses are dead, the hating and fighting impulses will still respond to fit appeals. This evil which we feel so deeply is something that we can also help to overthrow; for its sources, now that no 'Substance' or 'Spirit' is behind them, are finite, and we can deal with each of them in turn. It is, indeed, a remarkable fact that sufferings and hardships do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the contrary, usually to give it a keener zest. The sovereign source of melancholy is repletion. Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void.

What are our woes and sufferance compared with these? Does not the recital of such a fight so obstinately waged against such odds fill us with resolution against *our* petty powers of darkness,—machine politicians, spoilsmen, and the rest? Life is worth living, no matter what it bring, if only such combats may be carried to successful terminations and one's heel set on the tyrant's throat. To the suicide, then, in his supposed world of multifarious and immoral nature, you can appeal—and appeal in the name of the very evils that make his heart sick there—to wait and see *his* part of the battle out. And the consent to live on, which you

ask of him under these circumstances, is not the sophistical 'resignation' which devotees of cowering religious preach: it is not resignation in the sense of licking a despotic Deity's hand. It is, on the contrary, a resignation based on manliness and pride. So long as your would-be suicide leaves an evil of his own unremedied, so long he has strictly no concern with evil in the abstract and at large. The submission which you demand of your self to the general fact of evil in the world, your apparent acquiescence in it, is here nothing but the conviction that evil at large is *none of your business* until your business with your private particular evils is liquidated and settled up. A challenge of this sort, with proper designation of detail, is one that need only be made to be accepted by men whose normal instincts are not decayed; and your reflective would-be suicide may easily be moved by it to face life with a certain interest again. . . .

. . . Now, when I speak of trusting our religious demands, just what do I mean by 'trusting'? Is the word to carry with it license to define in detail an invisible world, and to anathematize and excommunicate those whose trust is different? Certainly not! Our faculties of belief were not primarily given us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by. And to trust our religious demands means first of all to live in the light of them, and to act as if the invisible world which they suggest were real. It is a fact of human nature, that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition. The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a mere sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal,—this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane. Destroy this inner assurance, however, vague as it is, and all the light and radiance of existence is extinguished for these persons at a stroke. Often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will then set in.

Now turn from this to the life of man. In the dog's life we see the world invisible to him because we live in both worlds. In human life, although we only see our world, and his within it, yet encompassing both these worlds a still wider world may be there, as unseen by us as our world is by him; and to believe in that world *may* be the most essential function that our lives in this world have to perform. But "*may* be! *may* be!" one now hears the positivist contemptuously exclaim; "what use can a scientific life have for maybes?" Well, I reply, the 'scientific' life itself has much to do with maybes, and human life at large has everything to do with them. So far as man stands for anything, and is productive or originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have to deal with maybes. Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a not a scientific exploration or experiment or textbook, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true*. Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe,

and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself. You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust,—both universes having been only *maybes*, in this particular, before you contributed your act.

Now, it appears to me that the question whether life is worth living is subject to conditions logically much like these. It does, indeed, depend on you *the liver*. If you surrender to the nightmare view and crown the evil edifice by your own suicide, you have indeed made a picture totally black. Pessimism, completed by your act, is true beyond a doubt, so far as your world goes. Your mistrust of life has removed whatever worth your own enduring existence might have given to it; and now, throughout the whole sphere of possible influence of that existence, the mistrust has proved itself to have had divining power. But suppose, on the other hand, that instead of giving way to the nightmare view you cling to it that this world is not the *ultimatum*. Suppose you find yourself a very well-spring, as Wordsworth says, of—

> *"Zeal, and the virtue to exist by faith*
> *As soldiers live by courage; as, by strength*
> *Of heart, the sailor fights with roaring seas."*

Suppose, however thickly evils crowd upon you, that your unconquerable subjectivity proves to be their match, and that you find a more wonderful joy than any passive pleasure can bring in trusting ever in the larger whole. Have you not now made life worth living on these terms? What sort of a thing would life really be, with your qualities ready for a tussle with it, if it only brought fair weather and gave these higher faculties of yours no scope? Please remember that optimism and pessimism are definitions of the world, and that our own reactions on the world, small as they are in bulk, and necessarily help to determine the definition. They may even be the decisive elements in determining the definition. A large mass can have its unstable equilibrium overturned by the addition of a feather's weight; a long phrase may have its sense reversed by the addition of the three letters *n-o-t*. This life *is* worth living, we can say, *since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view,* and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success.

These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The 'scientific proof' that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV, greeted the tardy Crillon after a great victory had been gained: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques, and you were not there."

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844–1900)

from *Thus Spake Zarathustra: Voluntary Death*
from *The Twilight of the Idols: A Moral for Doctors*

Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most influential and controversial figures in German philosophical thought, was born in Rocken, Prussia, and studied theology and classical philology at the University of Bonn. One year later, he gave up theology, having lost his faith, and moved to the University of Leipzig, where he discovered the works of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (q.v.) and the German composer Richard Wagner. These two figures, as well as Greek tragedians like Aeschylus, represented the most important influences on Nietzsche's early thought. At age 24, Nietzsche became a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, where he continued to utilize pagan themes in developing his philosophy. In his first book, The Birth of Tragedy *(1872), these influences coalesce in his theory of Greek literature, which asserts that the two opposing forces in life, the Apollonian or rational, and the Dionysian or passionate, must come into momentary harmony with the "Primordial Mystery."*

In Thus Spake Zarathustra *(1883–85), Nietzsche develops many of the philosophical tenets central to his thought. Other significant works by Nietzsche include* Beyond Good and Evil *(1886) and* On the Genealogy of Morals *(1887). Nietzsche's views have been seen as influencing German attitudes in World War I and in providing the philosophical underpinnings for the Third Reich, even though Nietzsche was severely critical of German culture (a view that had undermined his friendship with Wagner) and would have considered the ways in which Nazism co-opted his views a complete distortion. Nietzsche suffered from poor health for most of his life; in 1889, he experienced a severe mental breakdown, perhaps associated with syphilis, from which he never recovered. He died on August 25, 1900.*

In Thus Spake Zarathustra, *Nietzsche introduced his concepts of the "superman" (*Übermensch*), "the will to power," and "the death of God." One must find value in life without the hope of a future reward in Heaven. The new science of Darwinism had done away with the notion of a watchful Creator; hence, a new order of supermen was needed to create value for themselves through the will to power, a fearless love for every aspect of life and fate, free from self-delusion or life-denying morality. In the following excerpts from* Thus Spake Zarathustra, *written in poetic prose, and* The Twilight of the Idols, *Nietzsche explores the notion of voluntary death within the new ethics of the* Übermensch*: Death should not so much be something that happens to us beyond our control as a matter of chance or surprise, but something we choose freely and deliberately, a choice that becomes a defining act of our lives. Entirely in contrast to Christianity, Nietzsche sees suicide as a positive act: "The man who does away with himself," Nietzsche writes in* The Twilight of the Idols, *"performs the most estimable of deeds."*

Sources

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Ch. 21, "Voluntary Death," tr. Thomas Common. In *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. 11, ed. Oscar Levy. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1909–11, 1964, pp. 82–85; also available from Project Gutenberg Release #1998 at www.gutenberg.org. *The Twilight of the Idols*, tr. Anthony M. Ludovici. In *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Vol. 16, ed. Oscar Levy. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., New York: Macmillan, 1927, pp. 88–91.

From THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

VOLUNTARY DEATH

Many die too late, and some die too early. Yet strange soundeth the precept: "Die at the right time!"

Die at the right time: so teacheth Zarathustra.

To be sure, he who never liveth at the right time, how could he ever die at the right time? Would that he might never be born!—Thus do I advise the superfluous ones.

But even the superfluous ones make much ado about their death, and even the hollowest nut wanteth to be cracked.

Every one regardeth dying as a great matter: but as yet death is not a festival. Not yet have people learned to inaugurate the finest festivals.

The consummating death I show unto you, which becometh a stimulus and promise to the living.

His death, dieth the consummating one triumphantly, surrounded by hoping and promising ones.

Thus should one learn to die; and there should be no festival at which such a dying one doth not consecrate the oaths of the living!
Thus to die is best; the next best, however, is to die in battle, and sacrifice a great soul.

But to the fighter equally hateful as to the victor, is your grinning death which stealeth nigh like a thief—and yet cometh as master.

My death, praise I unto you, the voluntary death, which cometh unto me because *I* want it.

And when shall I want it?—He that hath a goal and an heir, wanteth death at the right time for the goal and the heir.

And out of reverence for the goal and the heir, he will hang up no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life.

Verily, not the rope-makers will I resemble: they lengthen out their cord, and thereby go ever backward.

Many a one, also, waxeth too old for his truths and triumphs; a toothless mouth hath no longer the right to every truth.

And whoever wanteth to have fame, must take leave of honour betimes, and practise the difficult art of—going at the right time.

One must discontinue being feasted upon when one tasteth best: that is known by those who want to be long loved.

Sour apples are there, no doubt, whose lot is to wait until the last day of autumn: and at the same time they become ripe, yellow, and shrivelled.

In some ageth the heart first, and in others the spirit. And some are hoary in youth, but the late young keep long young.

To many men life is a failure; a poison-worm gnaweth at their heart. Then let them see to it that their dying is all the more a success.

Many never become sweet; they rot even in the summer. It is cowardice that holdeth them fast to their branches.

Far too many live, and far too long hang they on their branches. Would that a storm came and shook all this rottenness and worm-eatenness from the tree!

Would that there came preachers of SPEEDY death! Those would be the appropriate storms and agitators of the trees of life! But I hear only slow death preached, and patience with all that is "earthly."

Ah! ye preach patience with what is earthly? This earthly is it that hath too much patience with you, ye blasphemers!

Verily, too early died that Hebrew whom the preachers of slow death honour: and to many hath it proved a calamity that he died too early.

As yet had he known only tears, and the melancholy of the Hebrews, together with the hatred of the good and just—the Hebrew Jesus: then was he seized with the longing for death.

Had he but remained in the wilderness, and far from the good and just!

Then, perhaps, would he have learned to live, and love the earth—and laughter also!

Believe it, my brethren! He died too early; he himself would have disavowed his doctrine had he attained to my age! Noble enough was he to disavow!

But he was still immature. Immaturely loveth the youth, and immaturely also hateth he man and earth. Confined and awkward are still his soul and the wings of his spirit.

But in man there is more of the child than in the youth, and less of melancholy: better understandeth he about life and death.

Free for death, and free in death; a holy Naysayer, when there is no longer time for Yea: thus understandeth he about death and life.

That your dying may not be a reproach to man and the earth, my friends: that do I solicit from the honey of your soul.

In your dying shall your spirit and your virtue still shine like an evening after-glow around the earth: otherwise your dying hath been unsatisfactory.

Thus will I die myself, that ye friends may love the earth more for my sake; and earth will I again become, to have rest in her that bore me.

Verily, a goal had Zarathustra; he threw his ball. Now be ye friends the heirs of my goal; to you throw I the golden ball.

Best of all, do I see you, my friends, throw the golden ball! And so tarry I still a little while on the earth—pardon me for it!

Thus spake Zarathustra.

from THE TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS

A MORAL FOR DOCTORS

The sick man is a parasite of society. In certain cases it is indecent to go on living. To continue to vegetate in a state of cowardly dependence upon doctors and special treatments, once the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost, ought to be regarded with the greatest contempt by society. The doctors, for their part, should be the agents for imparting this contempt—they should no longer prepare prescriptions, but should every day administer a fresh dose of *disgust* to their patients. A new responsibility of ruthlessly suppressing and eliminating *degenerate* Life, in all cases in which the highest interests of life itself, of ascending life, demand such a course—for instance in favour of the right of procreation, in favour of the right of the right of being born, in favour of the right to live. One should die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death should be chosen freely,—death at the right time, faced clearly and joyfully and embraced while one is surrounded by one's children and other witnesses. It should be affected in such a way that a proper farewell is still possible, that he who is about to take leave of us is still *himself*, and really capable not only of valuing what he has achieved and willed in life, but also of *summing-up* the value of life itself. Everything precisely the opposite of the ghastly comedy which Christianity has made of the hour of death. We should never forgive Christianity for having so abused the weakness of the dying man as to do violence to his conscience, or for having used his manner of dying as a means of valuing both man and his past!—In spite of all cowardly prejudices, it is our duty, in this respect, above all to reinstate the proper—that is to say, the physiological, aspect of so-called *Natural* death, which after all is perfectly "unnatural" and nothing else than suicide. One never perishes through anybody's fault but one's own. The only thing is that the death which takes place in the most contemptible circumstances, the death that is not free, the death which occurs at the wrong time, is the death of a coward. Out of the very love one bears to life, one should wish death to be different from this—that is to say, free, deliberate, and neither a matter of chance nor of surprise. Finally let me whisper a word of advice to our friends the pessimists and all other decadents. We have not the power to prevent ourselves from being born: but this error—for sometimes it is an error—can be rectified if we choose. The man who does away with himself, performs the most estimable of deeds: he almost deserves to live for having done so. Society—nay, life itself, derives more profit from such a deed than from any sort of life spent in renunciation, anæmia and

other virtues,—at least the suicide frees others from the sight of him, at least he removes one objection against life. Pessimism *pur et vert*, can *be proved only* by the self refutation of the pessimists themselves: one should go a step further in one's consistency; one should not merely deny life with "The World as Will and Idea," as Schopenhauer did; one should in the first place *deny Schopenhauer*. . . . Incidentally, Pessimism, however infectious it may be, does not increase the morbidness of an age or of a whole species; it is rather the expression of that morbidness. One falls a victim to it in the same way as one falls a victim to cholera; one must already be predisposed to the disease. Pessimism in itself does not increase the number of the world's *decadents* by a single unit. Let me remind you of the statistical fact that in those years in which cholera rages, the total number of deaths does not exceed that of other years.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SUB-SAHARAN CULTURES (documented 1853–present)

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(Hans Abrahamsson)

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LoDagaa

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Akan

#4. T*he Detection of Witches: Ordeal and Punishment*

Ashanti

#5. *Law and Constitution: A Suicide's Trial*
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#7. *The Price of Intrigue with Women of Royal Blood*
(A. B. Ellis, 1887)

Fante

#8. *Killing Oneself "Upon the Head of Another": The Tragedy of Adjuah Amissah*
(Brodie Cruickshank, 1853)

Gã

#9. *The Prohibition of Death* (in Archive only)
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Ewe

#10. *The Criminality of Suicide*
(A. B. Ellis, 1890)

Yoruba

#11. *The Kings of the Yoruba*
(Samuel Johnson, 1897)

#12. *Yoruba Laws and Customs: Suicide*
(A. K. Ajisafe, 1924)

Igbo

#13. *Evil Spirits*
(Northcote W. Thomas, 1913)

#14. *Sacrifices, Death, and Burial* (in Archive only)
(G. T. Basden, 1938)

#15. *A Murderer Must Hang Himself*

#16. *An Old Woman's Prearranged Funeral*
(G. T. Basden, 1921)

Zulu

#17. *The Timely Death*

#18. Godusa: *The Old Woman and the Ant-bear's Hole*
(R. C. A. Samuelson, 1929)

#19. Ukugodusa: *The First Woman Who Became a Christian*
(L. H. Samuelson, 1912)

#20. *The Burial of a King*
(R. C. A. Samuelson, 1929)

Banyoro

#21. *The Ghost of a Suicide*

Dinka

#22. *The Folktale of the Four Truths* (in Archive only)

#23. *Burial Alive: The Master of the Fishing-Spear*

A continent comprising a fifth of the world's land area, once the central portion of earth's landmass, Africa was the area of origin for homo sapiens, *the modern human, some 130,000–200,000 years ago. Below the vast desert that has come to serve as a cultural divide between sub-Saharan Africa and the largely Arabic regions edging the Mediterranean to the north, the African terrain consists primarily of flat or lightly rolling plains, without a central mountainous core or a broad continental shelf, a continent marked primarily by gradual changes of altitude and a highly regular coastline, rich in mineral, plant, and animal resources.*

Within sub-Saharan Africa, forms of social organization range from small nomadic bands of hunter-gatherer-forager peoples, to farming and cattle-herding cultures, to highly urbanized societies. Traditional cultures have been largely rural and agricultural, many with trading networks but largely

without centralized governmental authorities; yet Africa has also seen the formation of vast empires, including the 10th-century empire of Ghana, the 14th-century empire of Mali, the 15th-century empire of Bunyoro, the Ashanti empire of the 18th and 19th centuries, the 19th-century empire of Buganda, and the 19th-century kingdom of the Zulu, among many others. Many traditional communities stress both kinship networks with a unilineal pattern of descent and age-graded associations, especially among males. Among many, dowries are paid from male to female (the "bridewealth"), procreation is emphasized, and polygyny is a traditional ideal. However, traditional African societies are extremely diverse, and generalization is not possible. Furthermore, geographic and cultural boundaries do not always coincide, and an overall picture of Africa and its many societies is necessarily complex.

The standard way of classifying traditional oral African societies is by language, though this process is complicated by patterns of migration and language spread and by issues concerning the distinction between language *and* dialect. *Four major language families or phyla contain what Barbara Grimes estimates to be Africa's approximately 2,000 distinct indigenous languages. Among these language families, the largest groups are the Niger-Congo (including Kordofanian and Bantu), spoken in western and south-central Africa, with some 1,436 languages; Nilo-Saharan, spoken in central and central-eastern interior regions (196 languages); the Khosian family of click languages, spoken in the southern interior (35 languages); and Afroasiatic, including Semitic, Egyptian, Berber, Cushitic, and other languages of the north (371 languages). Among Africa's huge variety of languages, Hausa, a Chadic language of the Afroasiatic family, and Swahili, an eastern coastal Niger-Congo language of the Bantu subfamily, have played the roles of lingua franca for trade; so have a variety of other languages, including Arabic, Afrikaans, French, and English. Many of the selections presented here are from the Niger-Congo family, which includes languages spoken by the majority of sub-Saharan Africans.*

Few of Africa's traditional sub-Saharan societies have written literatures. However, most have substantial, longstanding oral traditions. Wherever possible, these selections attempt to present traditional African legends, myths, stories, and histories concerning suicide from the earliest documenters of each culture's oral history. Many of these documents were written or compiled from other accounts by Western explorers and missionaries using native informants. Other documents, however, come from educated Africans who wrote in Western languages but could interview informants in their native tongues.

While it is impossible to generalize effectively over such a large range of cultures in a geographic region as large as Africa, some similarities, Robert Lystad argues, are evident among traditional African values: that human nature is neither good nor evil, but capable of error; that humans should adapt to nature and the universe, rather than seek to alter it; that property is to be shared; and that the solutions to human problems are to be sought in traditional legends and stories. The universe is understood as a unity, not a dualism of mind/body or matter/spirit; the Creator or creative power is distant, though lesser gods and local spirits may intervene in the affairs of humans. Particularly relevant to issues of suicide are the beliefs that there is life after death and that kinship networks include family members who have already died, as well as those who are still living.

Beginning in the late 15th century, European commercial, colonizing, and proselytizing interests began to penetrate sub-Saharan Africa. The Portuguese, British, French, Germans, Spanish, Italians, Dutch, and Belgians all established areas of colonial rule, variously exporting minerals, goods, and slaves. Taking advantage of certain traditional slaving practices, the European slave trade increased from about 275,000 between 1450–1600, to about 1.3 million during the 17th century, about 6 million during the 18th century, and ended, after another 2 million, in the latter half of the 19th century. Brazil, the Spanish Empire, the British West Indies, the French West Indies, and North America were all major importers of slaves; so was the Arab world. Altogether, an estimated 12 million left

the African continent as slaves in the European trade; an estimated 10–20% died during the Middle Passage.

The sources provided here largely postdate the era of enslavement and the slave trade, but that era and its consequences were hardly forgotten: As Brodie Cruickshank had commented in 1853 on the comparatively few European forts that remained after the end of the slave trade in the Gold Coast, ". . . there is something exceedingly horrible in the contemplation of the nations of Europe thus clinging to Africa like leeches and sucking her very life-blood, and to find her now almost neglected and forsaken when she is no longer permitted to be their prey."

As with other oral cultures, accounts of myths, histories, and practices by outsiders, invaders, missionaries, and exploiters may well be influenced by the cultural ideologies of the reporters—in Africa, primarily Christianity and Islam—but they nevertheless offer the closest insight into traditional African culture and its views. A particularly vivid example of the tensions between direct access to traditional cultural material and Westernizing influences is to be found in the accounts of the Yoruba by Rev. Samuel Johnson (c. 1845–1901) (selection #11), one of the earliest and most prolific writers on African history. Johnson was himself a great-grandson of the Alafin Abiodun, the famous king of the Oyo Empire in the late 18th century, but was also a committed Christian, educated in Greek, Latin, mathematics, and Western philosophy and religious studies. A diplomat, missionary, and peacemaker in the disputes among Yoruba groups, as well as between the British and the Oyo, Johnson spoke African languages and was able to interview the traditional arokin*, or court historians, in compiling his immense and authoritative* History of the Yoruba*; yet he reinterpreted Yoruba history as exhibiting its development toward the ultimate end of becoming Christianized. Johnson eventually became an Anglican priest, hoping ". . . above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land—paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial—[and that this] should be the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba." Such overlays of personal commitment and worldview affect virtually all of the early published accounts of African belief and practice, which are then sometimes taken as sources for later traditions or held to "confirm" the work of later scholars. Yet at the same time, modern scholars like Kwame Gyekye insist that the difficulty of getting at indigenous ideas is not insuperable: he notes that in Akan, as in every African community, there are a few older individuals regarded as wise and steeped in traditional lore, who are able to distinguish between traditional philosophical conceptions and those of Christianity and Islam. Indigenous thinking may sometimes be formulated in Christian or Islamic religious language, but it often survives in comparatively untouched form.*

Further risks in the use of early ethnographic sources include the overlay of unconfirmed theories of indigenous belief and practice. In perhaps the best-known example of apparent overinterpretation, it was reported as late as 1910 that the Shilluk (or Chollo), a culture of Nilo-Saharan speakers in southern Sudan closely related to the Dinka presented here, customarily strangled their kings when they grew old or ill in order to save the divinity within, a report that Sir James George Frazer developed in The Golden Bough *(1911–15) into the centerpiece of his influential theory of African regicide. However, the practice of ceremonial regicide and the theory Frazer constructed were never reliably confirmed, and despite later modifications by Evans-Pritchard in 1948 and David Cohen in 1972, the claim that the disappearance of the Shilluk kings was the product of regicide or "royal suicide" has not been substantiated. Nevertheless, similar claims are represented here in Dr. Samuel Johnson's account of required suicide for despotic kings among the Yoruba (selection #11), and in the accounts of live burial by the Dinka of their chieftain, the Master of the Fishing-Spear (selection #23). In such cases, it is impossible to say what was in fact the case in the*

earlier periods of African civilization, or to determine whether the African kingship was an archaic magical system or a political, bureaucratic, and military institution, but the stories and legends that have been transmitted and collected have played a major role in conveying many forms of African thought. Similar difficulties in interpretation affect virtually all of the ethnographic material for every early culture presented in this volume. Yet despite their biases, the early reporters remain perhaps the most direct source of insight into the issues about suicide and voluntary death under scrutiny here.

The Selections

The selections are ordered geographically and by language group in roughly counterclockwise fashion, beginning with the northern areas of West Africa, moving down around the heavily populated regions of the Niger delta, then south and east to the region of the Zulu, and finally northeast to the Bantu in what is now northern Zimbabwe, the Ganda in Uganda, and the Dinka in the Nile basin of the Sudan. The numbering of sources includes both those in the print volume and in the associated Digital Archive. Sources from written traditions in North Africa and the Nile and Horn regions are entered separately in this volume. Most sources in this section come from West Africa, the region of sub-Saharan Africa most populated and most fully documented by early ethnographers.

Selection #1, "African Origin Myths," casts a broad sweep over a wide range of African origin myths serving to account for the occurrence of death, from the Islamic cultures of the Hausa to the traditional Benue-Congo cultures of the lower Zambesi. Despite the considerable variety of these myths, what is significant is that in many of them, death has come into being because man needs it, requires it, or desires it.

The Voltaic Branch of the Niger-Congo Subfamily

Selection #2, "The Souls of the Dogons," is drawn from the accounts of the Griaule ethnographic expeditions during 1931–39 to the Dogon, a group whose language is of the Voltaic branch of the Niger-Congo language family and who now live in the remote and rugged area of the Bandiagara escarpment and the Niger bend in southwest Mali. In part because of their isolation, the Dogon have been less affected by colonialism than many other African groups and have been able to maintain many of their pre-colonial cultural traditions. Ancestor worship is an important component of Dogon religion, and the Dogon are famed for their religious masks. In this selection from Dogon mottoes, a distinction is drawn between the individual soul that may survive in a life after death and the *nyama* or impersonal life-force, or vital principle, that would ordinarily be transmitted from the dead person to a specific newborn relative. The selection describes the negative implications of suicide for this process, including the notion that the harms of suicide are potentially transmissible.

Also from a Voltaic-speaking group is Jack Goody's contemporary account of the LoDagaa (selection #3), inhabitants of two settlements in the northwest corner of Ghana near the Black Volta River, who speak dialects of Dagari, a Mossi language. Although they have no centralized political system, the LoDagaa have highly developed funeral customs, including an elaborate set of suicide precautions for bereaved family members, reflecting assumptions about the likelihood, expectedness, and desirability of suicide after the death of a spouse or close family member.

The Kwa Branch of the Niger-Congo Subfamily

Moving to the south, selections #4 through #10 are drawn from various groups of Akan, a broad constellation of separate ethnic groups who speak Twi, a language of the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic subgroup. According to archeological and linguistic evidence, the Akan have inhabited a heartland in south central Ghana for some 2000 years. Akan groups include the Akan proper, the Ashanti (or Asante), the Fante (or Fanti or Fantee), and the Gã, members of which groups are now living in Ghana (called the Gold Coast in colonial times; now named after the Gã), Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo. Traditional Akan societies, largely agricultural, consist of some seven or eight matrilineal clans, and inheritance, kinship, and succession are all descended through the mother's line, although some offices and spiritual attributes are inherited patrilineally. After Portuguese traders and colonizers reached the coast of Ghana in the late 15th century, some Akan groups began to trade gold and slaves for European products, including guns. Beginning in about 1700, the Asante established the most powerful Akan state, dominating the region now known as Ghana until conquered by the British in 1900; this empire, said to be one of the "largest and most sophisticated imperial systems ever constructed without the aid of literary skills," was particularly known for its sumptuous artistic culture. However, in contrast to many other Akan, the Gã, who inhabited the coast, were patrilineal, though females could inherit property from their mothers; the men fished and raised crops while the women conducted trade. On one account, the Gã king, Okai Koi, committed suicide in 1660 after another Akan people, the Akwamu, defeated the Gã; on another, he was killed in battle in 1677. The Gã are now among the most urbanized of West African peoples.

Several of the Akan selections presented here describe the effects of contact with European colonizers on these traditional groups. Selection #4, from the Akan proper, "The Detection of Witches: Ordeal and Punishment," alludes to the British colonial government's efforts to suppress the execution of alleged witches and the practice of coerced suicide thus generated. From the Ashanti, selection #5, "Law and Constitution: A Suicide's Trial," taken from Capt. Rattray's monumental attempt to trace the development of legal, political, and judicial institutions from their origin in the simple family group under a house father to their functions in a colonial system under a paramount chief, describes traditional Ashanti (and, more generally, Akan) beliefs and legal principles concerning suicide, comparing them to European views. In this selection, as well as in selection #6, among others, traditional practices are seen in contrast to the legal systems administered by Europeans—for example, while among the Namnan, a small Northern Territory Ashanti tribe, a suicide's property was to be confiscated by the chief, much as the British suicide's property was forfeited to the king, some of his property in livestock might nevertheless remain to the wife and children, and dead bodies were subjected to trial and punishment (selection #5).

The contemporary philosopher Kwasi Wiredu explains these practices as rooted in the absolute principle of Akan justice that "no human being could be punished without a trial. Neither at the lineage level nor at any other level of Akan society could a citizen be subjected to any sort of sanctions without proof of wrongdoing." Wiredu also points to the importance of the belief that the life-principle is immortal. "Death is preferable to disgrace" runs a characteristic Akan saying; Wiredu notes that defeated generals, taking this to heart, often chose to commit suicide in the field.

Selection #6, on Ashanti funeral rites, is also taken from Capt. Rattray's accounts. Drawing on earlier reports and elderly informants, Rattray first describes the complete absence of funeral

rites for stillborns, neonates, and children who die—no ceremony at all, and the corpse is merely tossed into the bush—and then the contrastingly lavish funerals for kings, replete with both voluntary and non-voluntary deaths of the newly deceased king's wives, retainers, and captives in order to mark the funeral and continue to serve the king in the afterlife. Whether institutional suicide of those in subordinate social roles is to be regarded as suicide in any robust sense, or merely conformity to strong social expectation, is an issue in many traditional cultures, both in Africa and elsewhere.

Selection #8, on socially expected suicide, describes what contemporary suicidologists might call the "get-even" practice known as killing oneself "upon the head of another": by committing suicide, one person can visit the same calamity on another person. In Fante culture (as in many others, e.g., the Tlingit of Alaska), social responsibility for suicide is assigned to an outside party, not to the person who kills himself. Suicide thus makes it possible to control the behavior of other parties. A particularly vivid example is described in the tragedy of Adjuah Amissah, a beautiful young Fante woman from a town on what is now the coast of Ghana, whose sad story comes from the earliest selections in these accounts. The tale has evidently undergone evolution in its telling: Cruickshank's account holds that she killed herself with a silver bullet, while Edward Bowdich's version refers to golden bullets. The central point remains unchanged, however: Adjuah Amissah's suicide is attributed to her wish to save her family. In accord with Ashanti law, her family would be held responsible for the suicide of her suitor and, in effect, must pay in kind; Adjuah Amissah's own suicide protects them from this penalty.

Selection #9, "The Prohibition of Death," concerning the Gã people, raises issues about what counts as suicide. The traditional beliefs of the Gã about certain types of deaths do not appear to conceptualize them as suicide, but nevertheless do hold people accountable for dying at times or in ways that are impermissible; these beliefs thus seem to suggest that such deaths are after all in some sense voluntary.

The groups from which selections #10–16 come, the Ewe, the Yoruba, and the Igbo, are also members of the Kwa branch of Niger-Congo and also inhabit areas of West Africa surrounding the Niger River drainage basin—Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria—heavily vegetated areas with high temperature levels, heavy rainfall, and frequent thunderstorms, where population density is high.

The traditional Ewe heartland is southern Togo; the group's oral traditions tell of its flight from a brutal 17th-century tyrant, King Agokoli of Notsé, perhaps giving rise to its distrust of strong central authority. The absence of a strong central state left the Ewe particularly vulnerable to slave-raiding during the 17th–19th centuries. Selection #10, a British major's 1890 account of the Ewe-speaking peoples of the coast of West Africa, briefly describes practices in Dahomey, now Benin, in punishing suicides. Striking in this brief account is the apparent appropriation of European notions—"every man is the property of the king" and exposure of a suicide's body to public ridicule, reminiscent of European practices of desecration of the body—coupled with traditional African practices regarding suicide, in particular decapitation.

The Yoruba, in contrast, were highly urbanized before colonial times and formed powerful city-states centered around the royal residence of the *oba*, or king. Linguistic and archeological evidence suggests that speakers of a distinct Yoruba language emerged some 3000–4000 years ago in the area around the Niger-Benue confluence in what is now Nigeria. Patrilineal in descent patterns, Yoruba men farmed and practiced crafts; women dominated marketing and trade. The 13th- and 14th-century Yoruba bronzes and terracotta sculptures, as well as an oral literature of

histories, folklore, and proverbs, mark the richness of Yoruba culture. Traditional Yoruba religion recognizes a supreme but remote creator-god with a pantheon of lesser deities more directly involved in human affairs. Internal wars among Yoruba groups and city-states in the 19th century left the Yoruba vulnerable to slavery; exported with Yoruba slaves, Yoruba religion still forms the basis of Santería as practiced in modern Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil, and homes practicing forms of Santería such as Ocha ("the religion") may still contain shrines to Catholic saints and at the same time shrines to ancestral African dead. After the British gained control of Yorubaland in the late 19th century, the formerly strong Yoruba kings lost their sovereignty but were permitted to continue to play a role in local government.

Also belonging to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic family, the Igbo (formerly Ibo) have lived for thousands of years in a heartland around the lower Niger River. Unlike the Yoruba, they did not develop centralized state authorities or monarchies, but lived in autonomous, relatively democratic villages, each of which was knit together by overlapping kinship ties, secret societies, professional organizations, and religious cults and oracles. By the late 17th century, many Igbo had become slave traders who sold members of other ethnic groups, as well as other Igbo captured in the interior; the British outlawed the slave trade with the Abolition Act of 1807, attempting to substitute trade in palm oil for it. However, the decentralization and openness of Igbo culture seemed to invite missionaries, and most Igbo are now Christian. An ill-fated attempt in 1967 to establish an Igbo state, Biafra, resulted in massive starvation among the Igbo before the state was reabsorbed by Nigeria in 1970.

The lengthy Yoruba selection (#11) from Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, completed in 1897, reflects the historical centrality of the king in Yoruba society, and consequently, the social importance of the king's lineage and succession, the king's immediate family, and the king's funeral rites, as well as the forms of recourse available should a king prove despotic. Samuel Johnson's king histories from Sango onward depict many kings as suicides, including Sango himself. Family is important but can be too important: in Yoruba tradition, the king's natural mother is expected to commit suicide, to be replaced by a surrogate drawn from the court. An interlude concerning beliefs about birth and death suggests that the Yoruba hold that some children about to be born are in fact *abiku* or evil spirits: they enter the world only temporarily and then leave it at a pre-appointed date, though parents may attempt to dissuade them from doing so. This voluntaristic explanation of repeated failures of pregnancy is offered in a culture in which reproduction is held to be of paramount importance; it is not so much the mother who is blamed, but the child itself if it dies. In Bascom's account, the *abiku* is granted short spans of life by Olorun "because it does not want to remain long on earth, preferring life in heaven or wishing only to travel back and forth between heaven and earth"—a phenomenon believed to be common where infant mortality is high. Funeral customs concerning the king are of central cultural importance. Much as in a number of other traditional cultures in Africa, South America, Egypt, China, and elsewhere, the Yoruba considered it a privilege or an obligation to accompany the king into the afterlife, and accounts of early customs involve both voluntary and non-voluntary deaths by wives, retainers, and others for this purpose. Distinctive here is the practice of "wearing the death cloth," a much-cherished cloth received by those who will be expected to die with the king—the crown prince, certain other members of the royal family, and some of the king's wives—a cloth worn on special occasions that marks them for this eventual honor. Although such accounts may be challenged as exaggerated and unreliable, as was Sir James Frazer's theory of regicide among the Shilluk, they nevertheless appear consistent

with traditional beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife. Finally, according to Johnson, whose very early accounts are based on oral histories and on his interviews with tribal elders, Yoruba practice involves expecting a despotic king or one otherwise unable to govern wisely to commit suicide when he loses the confidence of the people. An ill or despotic king is not to be killed by others but, when the populace so indicates, is expected to die by his own hand. Less colorful than Johnson's narrations, A. K. Ajisafe's brief account (selection #12), concluding the Yoruba section, recounts practices he described in 1906 that show the ways in which historical attitudes toward suicide were reflected in everyday practice.

Selections #13–16, concerning the Igbo, conclude the material from the Kwa linguistic branch. In #13, a brief passage describes an evil spirit, the *akalagoli*, who after committing suicide continues to harm those who are still living; #14 and #15 describe rituals associated with suicide and the imposition of required suicide as a penalty for homicide. Selection #16 is particularly vivid in its description of cooperation in one's own death for practical reasons: advance planning for a death that will be carried out underscores the importance of a suitable funeral for continuity after death.

The Zulu, who are believed to have migrated into southern Africa sometime after the second century A.D., speak a Bantu tongue (Bantu is the best-known subgroup of Niger-Congo, spoken in much of the southern third of Africa) that developed as a distinct language well before the Zulu achieved a collective identity or centralized political structure, which did not emerge until intergroup conflict arose among Nguni groups over grazing lands and ivory sources in the late 18th century. Under the leadership of the brilliant strategist Shaka, who became clan chief in 1815 and who introduced such military innovations as the short stabbing spear, the Zulu established a huge kingdom, the size of contemporary Natal Province, within a single decade. They did not become subject to colonial rule until 1883, when the British invaded, and Zulu nationalism has remained a potent force in contemporary South African politics.

Selection #17 describes traditional Zulu attitudes toward timely and untimely death, providing the background for understanding the custom of *godusa*, "sending home" (also *goduka*, *ukugodusa*; root meaning to go away; go home; die). The term denotes the practice of killing or assisting in the suicide of an old person, or it may refer to a ceremonial feast of farewell to an old relative before assisting in his death. Although the practice was opposed by the colonial authorities and missionaries at the time of the accounts provided here, the two selections display the differing overlays of different observers. The two selections, #18 and #19, are reported by the daughter and one of the two sons of the Rev. S. M. Samuelson (d. 1916), who went to Natal in 1851 as a missionary, yet they are strikingly different: R. C. A. (Robert Charles Azariah) Samuelson (b. 1858), the son, narrates the story of the old woman and the antbear's hole (selection #18), an event that apparently took place in 1869–70, describing the practice as one that is acquiesced in, indeed accepted, by the old woman who is its target; she is described as consenting to burial alive and the practice is said to be understood by the Zulu as humane. At the same time, his elder sister, L. H. (Levine Henrietta, known as Nomleti) Samuelson (b. 1856), exhibits in selection #19 much more clearly the repugnance felt by many missionary reporters for the practice of senicide: she sees the old woman's death as cruel, the culmination of many years of threat with no humane intent. Selection #20 describes traditional customs surrounding the burial of a Zulu king, involving, as is reported

from many other early cultures around the world, the burial of live or newly killed wives and servants to accompany him.

Selection #21 is from the Banyoro, also Bantu-speakers whose language is Runyoro-Rutooro, who live in the area of western Uganda to the immediate east of Lake Albert. The Banyoro have been particularly concerned about upholding the ancient cultural traditions of their ancestors. This selection describes fears of ghosts—including the ghosts of suicides.

Selections #22 and #23 are from the Dinka, a cattle-herding group that lives in the broad savannahs of the central Nile basin in the Sudan and move from dry-season river camps to permanent settlements in the rainy season; they are closely related to the Shilluk. Cattle of are central importance in Dinka culture, and are involved in the suicide-related ceremonies described. Selection #22 is a traditional Dinka story, "The Folktale of the Four Truths," in which a threat of suicide not only shows its force in altering the situation, but exhibits the prospective suicide's own perception of his very modest replacement value as the sixth son, and recognizes himself as a far less valuable member of society than his adult uncle. Selection #23 describes the practice of burial alive, with full ceremonial honors, accorded the clan chieftain, the Master of the Fishing-Spear. Dinka belief holds that the Master of the Fishing-Spear "carries the life of his people," and that if he dies like ordinary men—involuntarily—the life of his people, which is in his keeping, will be gone with him. In contrast, burial alive, normally at the Master of the Fishing-Spear's own request, assures the people of their own vitality and success in war. If the Master of the Fishing-Spear were to die an accidental death or from illness, it could have serious consequences for the whole tribe. The practice of burying the Master of the Fishing-Spear alive is believed to prevent illness among the people—as one Master of the Fishing-Spear is reported to have explained, "I am going to see (deal with) in the earth the Powers of sickness which kill people and cattle"—as well as to settle a family dispute; after three months, the old men of the tribe reported, there was no more cattle plague. In another famous case in western Dinkaland, a renowned Master of the Fishing-Spear was reported to have "entered the grave clutching in his hand a tsetse fly, and thereby removed the scourge of tsetse from his people." Various anthropologists report burials alive, including Charles G. and Brenda Seligman in their expedition to the Sudan in 1909–12 and Lienhardt in 1947–50, though in both cases, informants are describing earlier practices not documented directly. Dinka sources also describe interference by government officials in attempting to suppress such practices and the various sorts of subterfuge the Dinka used in order to persuade the authorities that burial alive was no longer being practiced.

Suicide and attempted suicide were not uncommon among Africans captured and transported in the slave trade. Accounts of numbers of suicides are reported by some ship captains and slave owners or traders, but wholly without interest in the ethical issues such acts might have raised for the slaves themselves. A more compelling account of suicides among slaves under transport is to be found in the work of Olaudah Equiano [q.v.], an Igbo born in Nigeria and transported to Virginia. He was later freed, traveled widely, and eventually resided in London. Equiano [q.v.] published what became an influential factor in Britain's abolition of the slave trade, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789); this work contains accounts of slaves' suicides at sea and their belief that it would enable them to return to their homelands.

[#1] African Origin Myths: Man Desires Death

(Hans Abrahamsson)

It has several times been asserted that death enters into the world as a punishment because men have sinned against God, have been unwise or neglectful. In certain quarters, however, one meets with a totally different thought. Thus [among] the Kasai peoples Bena Lulua and Baqua Kabundu Kalambas [there is] a myth of the creation in which it is said that Fidi Mukullu created man in such a way that death belonged to his nature ever since the creation. It is then stated in the myth that "Without magic, diseases, knives, lances, war, and death, life would be just eating, drinking, sleeping, digestion. Without death, it is not good." . . . That death is as a matter of fact actually a good and useful factor in human existence is reflected in some myths concerning the origin of death which are here brought together under the heading "Man desires death." . . .

. . . An instance from the Hausa in Tunisia . . . tells us in the first place why human life is so short. . . . According to the tradition, it was 'Azrā'īl who "brought early death into the world." The first people lived for hundreds of years. Thus one virgin had lived for five hundred years before she died. Moses one day found her anklets, which had been taken off before her death, and prayed to Allah that he might be allowed to see the owner. Allah made the woman rise up from the grave, but in the course of her conversation with Moses she bewailed the fact that she had been brought back to life. She had already lived far too long and had become tired of life. Moses then prayed that Allah might let people die earlier, more especially as they had begun to become too numerous, "so Allah decreed that they should die after some sixty or seventy years, and told Azrael to see to this." . . .

Among the Dogon, there are . . . two categories of ancestors: those who lived before death had made its entry into the world of men, and who therefore were and are immortal, and those who lived after the entrance of death, and who were therefore mortal. . . .

Also among the Joruba we meet with the notion that men had at one time desired death. A very long time ago people did not die. Instead, they grew to an immense size; but when they became older they shrank, and became as little as children. They were then transformed into stones. "There were . . . so many old folk crawling around that people the people asked Olorun to free them from life. Olorun agreed, and so the very elderly died."

According to a tradition among the Bamum, God had created men healthy and strong. He could therefore not understand that many of them suddenly became cold and stiff. One day he met Death, and asked him if it was he who caused this. Death declared that he would show God that the people themselves summoned him. God concealed himself behind a banana-hedge, and Death sat down by the wayside. First came an old, racked slave, who bewailed his lot and said: "Oh, the dead are well off! If only I had never been born!" He immediately fell down dead. The next to come that way was an old woman. She, too, complained about the troubles of life and fell lifeless to the ground. Death then said to God: "Do you see now that she has called for me?" God then went away grieved, since his creatures called upon Death.

Also among the Ngala, men wish to die out of weariness with life's difficulties. Formerly, there were human beings in heaven. They did not die, nor do they die now. There were also people on earth, and they did not die either. But one day God asked the people on earth: "Would you like to live forever, or live well for awhile and then die?" And the people on earth answered: "We want to die because there are too many bad things in the world!" Since then, men are subject to death.

Among the Korongo, a Nuba tribe, we find over-population as the cause of man's desire that death should come into the world. At one time, it is said, the country was thickly populated, and the number of inhabitants became constantly greater, for there was neither sickness nor death. "In high spirits, the people began to perform sham funerals, carrying a tree trunk in the funeral procession and burying it with full ceremonial." But when God saw this, he became angry, and sent sickness and death to men as a punishment for their mockery. . . .

. . . the Nuer have a myth according to which God spoke with men and asked them whether they wanted to live for ever or die. The people said to God that the earth was growing full of people, and that it would be better that some should die and make room for those who came after them. And God answered: "Oh! All right!" In the continuation of the myth we are told that on the same day the dog had come to see the cattle, and had then asked the people in the village whether God had spoken with them, and what he had said. They related what had taken place, and that God had thrown a stone into the river. When the dog was told where this had happened, it dived into the river and came up again with a little stone. "People are always restored by it."

The Nyamwezi say that originally two people lived on the earth: a man, Kassangiro, and a woman, Mbaela. They got seven children, who intermarried and in their turn had children of their own. The man now wanted to prepare a medicine, so that all might live. But the woman was of another opinion, and said: ". . . it would be better if people died, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to find wood or room in their fields. So then these two oldest people died." The same notion of the origin of death occurs also in the "Zambezi region," [among] the Ravi, Yao, Teve, Nyungwe, Nyanja, Lolo, Makua, Rgwe and Sena. . . . Here people say that a long time ago death occurred only as a consequence of war, murder or attacks by wild animals. Human life was otherwise unlimited. Children grew up to become men and women and lived on without becoming either old or infirm. The consequence of this was such a rapid increase of the population that far-sighted persons in the community began to become uneasy at the prospect of a time when the resources of the earth could not possibly suffice for the needs of all. They therefore held a meeting, and decided that a change must be brought about that would set a limit to the length of human life. "To compass this, the only possible method was to petition the world of spirits so to order the destinies of mankind that, after a reasonable period of life on earth, the sons of men might qualify for admission to the celestial circle by the processes of bodily decay."

Source

[#1] "African Origin Myths: Man Desires Death," from Hans Abrahamsson, *The Origin of Death, Studies in African Mythology*, Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia III (Uppsala, SE: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1951), pp. 73–77. German and French translated from the original.

DOGON

[#2] The Souls of the Dogons
(Solange de Ganay, 1937–39)

With men, this force [the nyama] depends on the *kikinu sae*, or the soul. Whereas the soul is individual and pursues its extra-human destiny after death, the *nyama* is the impersonal element, which, after separating itself from the body upon death, goes to another being (ordinarily

a newborn) which it normally imbues. However, if it is a matter of a violent death, this migration provokes disorders which the living combat with the appropriate rites.

However, this rule does present some exceptions. The souls of certain deceased are essentially condemned to wander in the bush; they become evil beings, or *dyabu*, whose vital force cannot be perpetuated in a *nani* respondent. This involves either young people who have died as virgins or adults who have died in such a way that the relatives decide that the funeral rites, which would permit the soul of the deceased to consume the libations offered on the ancestral altars, should not be carried out. The soul is thus left to wander and cannot impart its dangerous *nyama* to a newborn. A dwarf, a suicide, or an epileptic, whose maladies are feared for being passed on to a *nani* respondent or even a family member, are part of this category of the excluded. . . .

The souls of certain adults, who die in unusual circumstances, are condemned to wander eternally in the bush where they become a dangerous power, or *dyabu*. This involves, among others, those whom the society intends to keep out by preventing the reincarnation of their *nyama* in one or more of its members; consequently, none of the customary rites which follow the funerals are executed, and the soul—which is not called to consume from the family altar—is thus excluded from the community.

Men who fall asleep in the proximity of stones called *dummo kumogu*, which bear a dangerous *nyama*, contract an illness, or *dummo suga* (lit: "stone falls"), hence their name of *dummo sugone*, "one who falls like a stone." When a man affected by this illness dies, there is neither a funeral nor a Dama, so that he will not have a *nani* (respondent) and that his soul will not be able to transfer the harmful *nyama* to any members of the family.

The same custom was once observed for a suicide. The *dyabus* are compared to the "bad wind" or to the "whirling wind" (*onu simu*). It is said that they "strike the men" and give them smallpox. Since these wandering souls are essentially dangerous because they are unsatisfied and incapable of joining the other souls in Manga, the society must protect itself against their harmful acts. The Dogon have built altars on which they offer sacrifices which are intended to protect them from the attacks of the *dyabus*. They also make use of amulets.

Sources

[#2] Solange de Ganay, "The Souls of the Dogons," from *Dogon Mottoes*; some footnotes interpolated; selection title and commentary from Germaine Dieterlen, *The Souls of the Dogons*, tr. Sherri L. Granka (Paris 1941; New Haven, CT: HRAF, 2000).

LODAGAA

[#3] The Day of Death: Restraining the Bereaved to Prevent Suicide
(in Archive only)
(Jack Goody, 1962)

AKAN

[#4] The Detection of Witches: Ordeal and Punishment

Normally, a witch cannot be detected in daylight, but there are certain signs supposed to be warnings that witchcraft is in the air. . . .

Ordeals

. . . In order to find out the guilty person, African justice in the past often resorted to trial by ordeals. In this way thieves, murderers, taboo-breakers and witches were "found out.". . . The suspects were made to chew dry rice and those who could not swallow it were declared guilty. Medicine men were alleged to possess black powder with which they could make a witch glow or even burn, if they rubbed it on his forehead. After the application of a counter-medicine, the witch would confess. The Gas used some special medicated eyewater which would blind the guilty ones and leave the innocent unharmed. More serious was the ordeal with boiling oil, into which the suspect was to hold his hand. This ordeal was surrounded by an elaborate ritual. Even more fearful was the poison ordeal, where a concoction of the bark of the Odom (*not* Odum) tree was drunk by the suspect. Fainting and loss of consciousness were taken as proof of guilt. Such poison ordeals are common all over Africa. The most important Ghana ordeal was the so called "carrying of the corpse." The dead body of a person who had died a strange death was carried by either two or four men. (Sometimes some objects represented the actual body.) The "corpse" was asked questions and answered "yes" or "no" by the way it "made the carriers sway or knock forward." In this way the corpse could knock against the guilty person. . . . These ordeals are now all prohibited by law.

The Punishment

What happened if an ordeal had designated somebody as a real or "spiritual" murderer, poisoner or witch? The proverb says: "the corpse which is going to knock against someone cares nothing for cries of sorrow."

In olden days a person found guilty by the poison ordeal was caught by the feet, dragged through the scrub and over stones till his body was torn to pieces and he died. This was the procedure among the Gas.

Among the Ashantis, a witch's blood may not be shed. She was, therefore, strangled to death, or drowned, or clubbed, or smeared all over with palm oil and cast into a fire.

Another method of punishment has also been described by Captain Rattray: "A self confessed witch used to have a firebrand placed in her hand before being expelled from the village. A message was sent to the next village, from which she would also be driven and so on. This punishment really amounted to the death penalty."

Among the Brongs at Boundoukou, the person found guilty was clubbed to death in the forest and his body was just thrown into the bush and not buried—a terrible punishment, if one knows how important for the after life correct burial is esteemed among the pagan. Among the Nǩonya (a Guang tribe) the punishment was death by burning, or the payment of a ransom to the value of seven slaves. Among the Agni, the punishment for witchcraft was decapitation.

Until a century ago, the person convicted of witchcraft was almost always put to death by torture as Bowdich attests. This was really just a ceremonial form of lynching. . . .

. . . After the Colonial Government had stopped this lynching, another form of punishment became more frequent: it was that of telling or expecting the person found guilty to commit suicide. The same Rev. Mader reports another case of "carrying the corpse," where the "guilty person" was a mother of eight children. Through fear of the government—since two soldiers happened to be in town—she was not lynched but socially ostracized. Everybody avoided her. Her relatives told her to take courage and kill herself. She even went to see the paramount chief to ask for her

death, but was refused-again for fear of the Government. She was then taken into custody in the house of an elder. There the constant mockery so distressed her, that she finally asked permission to fetch firewood in the bush and there she hanged herself.

Since the Government has abolished all this elaborate trial by ordeal and summary punishment, what reaction follows? . . . However cruel the old system may look to us today, it maintained some order. Guilty persons were found—it did not matter whether they always really were guilty or not—and the system gave a certain sense of security. This was destroyed by the Government, which, of course, only wanted to prevent cruelty and could not do otherwise than to prohibit such customs. . . .

Source

[#4] Rev. H. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A study on the belief in destructive witches and its effect on the Akan tribes* (Accra, GH: Presbyterian Book Depot Ltd., 1959), 2nd ed. 1961, pp. 100–104.

ASHANTI

[#5] Law and Constitution: A Suicide's Trial
(Capt. R. S. Rattray, 1929)

The offences set out [below] were known in Ashanti as *Oman Akyiwadie*, which, translated literally, means, 'Things hateful to the Tribe.' These acts were looked upon as sins of which the central authority was bound to take immediate official notice, lest certain supernatural powers, to whom the deeds were regarded as peculiarly offensive, should wreak their vengeance, upon those whose paramount duty it was to protect their interests and to punish breaches of immemorial law or custom. . . .

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Suicide, except under certain peculiar circumstances, was formerly regarded in Ashanti as a *capital sin*. It was a sin of which the central authority took immediate cognizance. These two statements of fact exhibit at once the difference and the similarity between our laws and theirs. Suicide and attempted suicide result, in our own country [England], in both legal and ecclesiastical consequences, but to state that suicide was 'a capital offence' must at first sight appear somewhat curious. Not all forms of what we would tern 'suicide' were regarded as sins; in fact, under certain circumstances, the action of taking one's own life was considered as honourable and acclaimed as praiseworthy; e.g. to kill oneself in war by taking poison, or sitting on a keg of gunpowder to which a light was applied, rather than fall into the hands of the enemy or return home to tell of a defeat; to take one's own life in order to accompany a beloved master or mistress to the land of the spirits; and finally, those especially interesting cases, where a man commits suicide to wipe out what he considers his dishonour and because he cannot stand the ridicule of his companions. Suicide was considered a sin when it was carried out to avoid the consequences of some wrongful deed, or when, after investigation, it was not possible to ascribe any motive for the act. In the latter case there was always a legal presumption that the motive for self-destruction had been evil. In the disfavour with which the central authority seemed always to have regarded this offence, it is rather difficult to trace any other cause than the desire rigorously to maintain its prerogative as the sole dispenser of capital punishment. It

is just possible, however, that the State, i.e. the tribal authority, may have placed suicide in the category of sins, owing to a dislike of having an evilly disposed disembodied spirit wandering about in its midst. The spirit of the suicide became a *saman twetwe*, a ghost wandering about in search of its head, for it was debarred from entering the *Samandow* (land of spirits) until the expiration of its destined time upon earth, which it had itself wrongfully curtailed. Moreover, when eventually reincarnated, it would return to this world as a *tofo sasa*—the spirit of one who had died an unholy death—with a cruel and murderous nature which would lead it again to meet a similar end in its next incarnation. The man who had committed an offence, the penalty for which he well knew was death, had not any right to balk the central authority of its right to execute him. The central authority indeed refused to be cheated thus, and the long arm of the law followed the suicide to the grave, from which, if his kinsmen should have dared to bury him, he was dragged to stand his trial before the council of Elders. The result of the trial was almost a foregone conclusion, for the dead man would either have been found to have committed some offence, and fearing the consequences (which might have been more terrible than any self-inflicted death, i.e. the *Atopere*) have taken his own life, or if it were not found possible to trace any motive for the deed, then the commission of some wicked act was presumed, and he was equally judged guilty. In the latter case his dead body was addressed by the *Okyeame* in the following words:

> *(Addressing the Chief.) 'This is your slave, (i.e. subject). No one knows what he had done, and to-day he has hanged himself. (Then addressing the corpse.) No man knows a single thing that came into your head (i.e. your motives), but, because you did not bring your case here that we might take good ears to hear it, but took a club and struck the Akyeame—and when you kill us (thus) you regard us as brute beasts—therefore you are guilty.'*

In the case of a murderer who had afterwards committed suicide the final summing up was as follows:

> *(Addressing the Chief.) 'This is your slave. (Addressing the corpse of the suicide.) Since it has come about that you have killed your fellow man, and when he had done a bad thing to you, you did not come to tell the Akyeame in order that we might have told the Chief and caused him to investigate the case for you, but instead, you went and killed him and also killed yourself, then because you did not bring your case here that we might have brought good ears to hear it, but instead raised a club and struck the Akyeame—and when you kill thus you treat us as if we were brute beasts—therefore you are guilty.'*

As soon as the *Okyeame* had delivered this oration, the Chief's executioners would step forward and decapitate the dead body. Here we have the explanation of the sentence 'Suicide was a capital offence.' The plaintiff in the case had been the murdered man. The sentence and 'execution' of the murderer implied his innocence. The party in a trial who is judged innocent pays *Aseda*, a thank-offering, to the Chief . . . really a fee to ensure that witnesses would be forthcoming on a possible future occasion to testify to the result of the trial). The murdered man could not claim exemption to this rule. He (i.e. his kinsmen) therefore paid *Aseda* and the kinsmen claimed the body of their murdered relation without further formality. Not so the blood relations of the murderer and suicide. They might not on any account remove his body for burial in the clan

sacred burial-ground; they might not even mourn for him. His headless trunk was cast into the bush, to wander, as we have seen, an unhappy headless ghost. Not only so, but his kinsmen could not themselves entirely escape the evil consequences of his deeds, a responsibility, that was even sometimes shared by the Chief himself. The kinsmen of the suicide had 'to drink to the gods' and to produce every bit of his (the suicide's) personal private property, which was then confiscated by the Chief. . . .

The immediate superior (if himself a Chief under a greater Chief) of a subject who had violated any of the great tribal or national taboos, and thereby incurred the death penalty, appears to have been held responsible that his subject did not escape punishment by committing suicide. . . .

At a later date the custom arose of permitting the kindred of a person found guilty of many of these capital sins 'to buy the head' of their clansman. It is very doubtful if this privilege was ever really extended to cases of deliberate murder, even at a late period when the majesty of law and the administration of justice were disregarded. By paying this price the confiscation of the offender's private property was avoided, and if, as in the case of a suicide, the guilty party were already dead, his kindred also obtained the body, the head of which was not cut off; they might mourn for him, and hold the usual funeral custom.

Source

[#5] Capt. R. S. Rattray, "Law and Constitution: A Suicide's Trial," from *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 294, 299–302 [field date 1921ff.].

[#6] Funeral Rites for Babies and Kings
(Capt. R. S. Rattray, 1929)

. . . I am afraid that some of the following pages may be repellent to some of my readers. I have considered it to be my duty to set out the details of many of the horrors of the old régime. I have done so in order that the motives and reasons for them may be better understood. In olden times, and in times not so long past, the Ashanti people may seem, to the superficial observer, to have been merely bloodthirsty men and women unworthy of any sympathy whatever, and yet more than one hundred years ago, when these orgies of blood were at their height, one who knew them well[1] placed the following statement on record:

'It is a singular thing that these people—the Ashantees—who had never seen a white man nor the sea, were the most civil and well bred I have ever seen in Africa. It is astonishing to see men with such few opportunities so well behaved.'

If such praise could be bestowed on a people who were at times guilty of the deeds that have been recorded by many travelers, I thought I would try to find out how these apparently opposing characteristics could be reconciled. . . .

Experience has taught me, moreover, that there is sometimes a danger when we have before us a description of a rite which leaves us uncertain of its real meaning or its true *raison d'être*.

[1] Mr. James Swanzy, given before a Commission of the House of Commons (Parliamentary Paper No. 506, p. 32, 20 June 1816).

We may commit the possible error of filling in this gap in our knowledge by construing the custom in terms of our own philosophy or of our own psychology. In most cases I believe, if we could follow up this rite to its end, or could properly understand it, we should find some good or, from our standpoint, perhaps some jejune consideration to account for it. . . .

Death: The Funeral of Kings

THUS far we have seen that the stages in an Ashanti's life have been indicated by a series of rites marking, as it were, certain exits and entrances. These transitions have not been abrupt, as all have been approached or departed from gradually. The child as yet unborn is already a denizen of the world of spirits. Its approaching arrival having been revealed, the expectant mother has a care not to do anything which might scare it back whence it is journeying. On the birth of the child a short period of suspense elapses, during which no one can be quite sure if the visitor from that other world of ghosts has come to stay permanently. After eight days there is more than hope, and the child is given a name. Still, the link with the land of spirits is not yet severed absolutely; the child grows up and lives in a kind of borderland between the world of men and women and the world of ghosts. Gradually, as years go on, bonds with the latter seem to weaken, until at the age of puberty they are perhaps severed completely, and the 'ghost child,' the 'pot child,' becomes a man or woman, capable of performing those functions which seem to an Ashanti to be the only reason or compensation for being born again or reincarnated, the propagation of the species. Such persons are now admitted for the first time into the status and to the full privileges of grown mortals. They are entitled to a say in matters concerning their family or clan's welfare; they are a potential power for good or for evil, not in an ethical sense, but in the realms of magic and religion. This recognition and acknowledgement of the new state into which they have now entered are really epitomized in the fact that should such a person die, he or she is entitled to, and must be accorded, full and proper funeral rites, and after death will receive honour and propitiation. His or her name will be held in pious memory as long as the clan exists.

Funeral ceremonies help to separate the dead from the living, to sever the ties with this world, and to assist the newly dead to pick up again the threads linking him or her with the land of spirits, which had been cut or dropped at puberty. . . .

Although the funeral rites for an Ashanti king and the ultimate disposal of his remains seem to differ materially from the obsequies of an ordinary individual, it does not necessarily follow, I think, that this indicates an intrusive culture. In the ceremonial for a dead king the differences possibly arose from a desire on the part of his people, not only to accentuate the disparity between the king, and the common herd, and even the great chiefs, but also to preserve his remains more carefully and reverently in order that these might serve as a medium or shrine for his spirit when it was summoned to return to his people in times of national reunion or national emergencies. In all this there is nothing exotic; it is only a crowning feature of the Ashanti belief in ancestral spirits and their propitiation. . . .

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One aspect, however, of these funeral rites of an Ashanti king has attracted much attention. This is the so-called 'blood-lust,' and the consequent apparently indiscriminate slaughter of victims. This feature of the royal obsequies has been emphasized and recorded in full by missionaries and other historians. . . . One of the best known of our anthropologists said to me, a little over a year ago, after reading the manuscript of *Ashanti*, 'I do not seem to recognize your Ashanti as here portrayed; they seem milk and watery as compared with the conception I had formed of them; what about all the slaughter at their funeral customs?' Now that very question had also worried

me considerably. I could not imagine that the fine, charming, and manly people I had learned to know would become the blood-thirsty savages described in many works I had read. As I had not then, however, investigated funeral rites and 'human sacrifices,' I could not express any opinion, and I therefore reserved judgement. I am now indebted for my knowledge to several old Ashanti of high rank, who have done me no small honour in admitting me into their confidence. They have disclosed to me secrets which would otherwise have passed with them into the grave. I have hesitated whether or not to allow some years to pass by before these statements are made public. Ashanti is, however, so rapidly advancing in civilization, that probably few of the younger generation will feel much interest in their recital. I am sure, moreover, that my older friends, venerable greybearded folk who themselves were actors in these events, will not object to the English public knowing the facts, which will help, I hope, to free the Ashanti from the stigma of having been bloodthirsty and ferocious savages before we took over the government of their country. I am now able to understand that there were motives other than mere blood-lust and cruelty, which ought to be known and taken into account before we pass judgement on the scenes of slaughter which seem to have been inseparable from great national mourning. Europeans seem to have an innate fear of the unknown beyond the grave; this the psycho-analyst calls *thanatophobia*, which has also been aptly designated as our 'passionate, absorbing, almost bloodthirsty clinging to life.' It will not therefore be easy to persuade the average person that there was something underlying all this spilling of blood, that ought to excite, if not admiration, at any rate a feeling that should be remote from disgust or pious horror. In the first place we should take into consideration a fact which was, of course, already well known, namely, that the persons killed on these occasions were supposed to resume after death their various duties under their royal master. It was incumbent upon those left on earth to see that the king entered the spirit-world with a retinue befitting his high station. Such killings thus became a last pious homage and service to the dead. The ideas and beliefs of the men who acted as executioners on those occasions and of their 'victims' with regard to death were the same. Death was merely a transition, like birth, from one kind of life to another. Although it would nowadays be far from correct to state that an Ashanti would as soon be dead as alive, never the less his outlook even now with regard to his exact position after death is not filled with any vague, troublesome misgivings as to what the hereafter may hold in store for him.

In ancient times, when life was much more uncertain and precarious than now, the attitude towards death was one of comparative indifference. . . .

. . . Among the scores killed at royal funerals were some of the highest of the land—high court officials, relatives and wives of the dead monarch, who, no longer having any desire to live once 'the great tree had fallen,' compelled their relatives to slay them by swearing the great oath that they must do so, thus not leaving them any option except to carry out their wishes. If we, then, take all these points into consideration, we may perhaps be entitled still to think this slaughter terrible, and to view such rites with abhorrence; but, on the other hand, we shall not be entirely just to this people should we, when writing or thinking to them, designate them senseless, savage, and brutal murderers.

The man or woman who, like some of these old Ashanti, was ready to die for an ideal, however misguided and mistaken it may have been, nevertheless is of the stuff which goes to the making of a virile and courageous nation, and is entitled to our respect and admiration. . . .

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The first intimation that the king had breathed his last would be, so I am informed, the sight of blood pouring from the royal bath-room. Here the body had been carried to be washed and

dressed; at each stage of the process some attendant or other had been killed, one 'to carry his bath mat, one the sponge and soap, one the bath robe,' and so on. The Queen Mother, perhaps the most powerful person in the kingdom, was immediately informed. She in turn dispatched messengers to the royal harem, for certain of the king's wives to prepare themselves to accompany their husband on the journey upon which he had set out. The king, before his death, might have informed the Queen Mother which of his women he wished to go with him, and she also might choose others for this privilege. Others again would volunteer to share their fate.[2] The message delivered to these women of the harem was, 'I bid you set out for a certain place,' and the answer always was, '*Ma te*,' 'I have heard Akoranto.' These women then sent for their relatives, bade them farewell, decked themselves in white, as for a ceremonial feast, and put on all their gold ornaments. On the night the royal body was removed from the palace to the first temporary mausoleum (the Barim Kese), the women, who had drunk themselves into a state of semi-consciousness with wine or rum, were strangled with leather thongs by men or women executioners. An alternative method of killing them was to twist their necks 'with strong hands.' Strangling in Ashanti is considered the aristocratic method of killing, because blood is not shed and there is not any mutilation.

Representatives of each section of household office-holders were killed in order to accompany the king; these included many young boys to act as elephant-tail switchers and heralds. The latter had their necks broken over the large elephant-tusk upon which the king used to rest his foot when bathing; they were smeared with white clay as a sign of joy. Besides all those who had not any option, freemen and sometimes slaves would volunteer for death. 'I am hungry' they would say, and should the executioner refuse to dispatch them they would swear the great oath, saying: 'I swear the great oath that you must kill me that I and my master may set out, for I am hungry'. Such volunteers could always choose the manner of their death; some chose to be shot, others preferred to be strangled, and they were also accorded full funeral rites. They could, moreover, choose such articles as they wished to take with them; these were put into the grave.

In addition to the four classes of victims—criminals, captives of war, volunteers, and various holders of office at court, who did not seem to have any say in the matter—there were undoubtedly a certain number of persons killed, during the first few days after the death was made public, by people who had worked themselves up into a state of frenzy, and by some psychological process, which I do not pretend to understand, seemed to find in promiscuous killing the only satisfactory relief to their emotions.

Source

[#6] Capt. R. S. Rattray, "Funeral Rites for Babies and Kings," from *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. vi-viii, 59–61, 103–109.

[2] Two cases known to me of royal wives volunteering to accompany their husbands were those of Afoa and Kra Akyerc, who were natives of Agona and Breman, and wives of King Kwaku Dua I. They were buried with full funeral rites, dressed in oyokoman cloth (the cloth of the royal clan). Kwesi Dubi, the ntahera' hene, uncle of my friend Kwame Sapon, shot himself in order to accompany his master Kwaku Dua I to the spirit world.

Captives and criminals killed at funerals were not buried; their bodies were cast into the forest near the spot *Diakomfoase* (somewhere near the site of the present rest house).

[#7] The Price of Intrigue with Women of Royal Blood
(A. B. Ellis, 1887)

In Ashanti the women of royal blood are permitted to intrigue with any eminently fine and handsome man in order that their kings may be of commanding presence. If, however, permission has not first been obtained, the lover, and all who have assisted him in his suit, are put to death. . . .

. . .With the king's permission his sisters can contract marriage with any man who is pre-eminently handsome, no matter how low his rank and position may be. But a man of low rank who may have thus married one of the king's sisters is expected to commit suicide when his wife dies, or upon the death of an only male child. Should he outrage native custom and neglect to do so, a hint is conveyed to him that he will be put to death, which usually produces the desired effect. . . .

Source

[#7] A. B. Ellis, "The Price of Intrigue with Women of Royal Blood," from *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa; their religion, manners, customs, laws, language, etc.* [c. 1890] (Reprint, Chicago: Benin Press, Ltd., 1964), pp. 287.

FANTE

[#8] Killing Oneself "Upon the Head of Another": The Tragedy of Adjuah Amissah
(Brodie Cruickshank, 1853)

The fame of Adjuah Amissah, a native of Cape Coast [modern Ghana], is still kept fresh in the memory of the natives, by the songs which they sing in honour of her death. People are still alive, who remember the great beauty which hurried her to an early grave. She became the object of a devouring passion on the part of a young man of Cape Coast. Her relations, considering that her charms authorized them to expect a better alliance, refused to admit his addresses. This rejection so preyed upon the mind of the disappointed lover, that his life became insupportable, and he determined to sacrifice himself to his passion. He resolved, however, that Adjuah Amissah's family should dearly rue having spurned his suit, and in the spirit of an inextinguishable vengeance he shot himself, attributing his death to his unrequited love, and invoking his family to retaliate it upon his murderess.

It is the principle of the Fantee law, to visit the cause of such a calamity with a similar retribution, and when a person puts himself to death, "upon the head of another," as they express it—that is, attributes the cause of his act to another's conduct—that other is required to undergo a like fate. The family of the unhappy girl endeavored to avert this fate by offering to pay a large sum in gold; but nothing but her death would satisfy the vengeance of the youth's relations, and they appealed to the native authorities to vindicate their laws. All the mercy which could be extended to Adjuah Amissah, was to allow her a few days to lament with her friends her untimely end, and to have a silver bullet put into the musket with which she was compelled to deprive herself of life. She employed the few days of respite, in singing with her young friends her farewell dirge, and completed the cruel sacrifice by shooting herself.

Source

[#8] Brodie Cruickshank, "Killing Oneself 'Upon the Head of Another': The Tragedy of Adjuah Amissah," from, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1853; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1966), Vol. 2, pp. 210–212.

GÃ

[#9] The Prohibition of Death (in Archive only) (M. J. Field, 1937)

EWE

[#10] The Criminality of Suicide (B. Ellis, 1890)

In Dahomi it is criminal to attempt to commit suicide, because every man is the property of the king, The bodies of suicides are exposed to public execration, and the head is always struck off and sent to Agbomi; at the expense of the family if the suicide were a free man, at that of his master if he were a slave.

Sources

[#10] A. B. Ellis, "The Criminality of Suicide," from *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa; their religion, manners, customs, laws, languages, &c.* [1890] (Reprint, Chicago: Benin Press, Ltd., 1965), p. 224.

YORUBA

[#11] The Kings of the Yoruba (Samuel Johnson, 1897)

Sango: The God of Thunder and Lightning, and his wife Oya

Sango was the fourth King of the Yorubas. . . . Sango reigned for seven years, the whole of which period was marked by his restlessness. He fought many battles and was fond of making charms. He was said to have the knowledge of some preparation by which he could attract lightning. The palace at Oyo was built at the foot of a hill called Ajaka's hill. One day the King ascended this hill accompanied . . . by his courtiers and some of his slaves, among whom were two favourites, Biri and Omìran; some of his cousins went with him, but none of his children. He was minded to try the preparation he had in hand; thinking it might have been damp and useless, he first made the experiment on his own house. But it took effect, a storm was immediately raised and the lightning had struck the palace before they came down the hill, and the buildings were on fire. Many of Sango's wives and his children perished in this catastrophe.

Sango who was the author of his own misfortunes became alarmed and dismayed at what had happened and from a broken heart he was resolved to abdicate the throne and retire to the court of his maternal grandfather, Elempe king of the Nupes.

All Oyo was now astir, not only to sympathize with the King, but also to dissuade him from carrying out his resolution; but he could not bear any opposition, and so mad was he, that he even used his sword against some of his loyal subjects who ventured to remonstrate with him, and who promised to replace for him his dead wives by others, by whom he might beget children, and so in time make good his present losses.

According to other accounts, he did not abdicate of his own freewill, but was asked to do so by a strong party in the state. Both accounts may be true, there may have been two parties, for to this day, Yorubas have an abhorence of a King given to making deadly charm; because for one who already has absolute power invested in him by law, this strange power can only be used spitefully, so that no one near him would be safe.

He was said to have caused 160 persons to be slain in a fit of anger, of those who were showing much concern and over-anxiety on his behalf, and who would prevent him by force from carrying out his resolve.

Thus determined he set out on his fateful journey with a few followers. Biri his head slave and favourite was the first to regret the step taken, and to urge on his master to yield to the entreaties of those citizens of Oyo, who with all loyalty promised to replace his losses, as far as man can do it, and to rebuild the palace; but finding the King inexorable, he forsook him and returned to the city with all his followers; Omiran likewise followed his example, and the King was thus left alone. He now repented his rashness, especially when he found himself deserted by his favourite Biri. He could not proceed alone, and for shame he could not return home, and so he was resolved to put an end to his own life; and climbing on a shea butter tree, he hanged himself.

His friends hearing of this tragedy went immediately and performed for him the last act of kindness, by burying his remains under the same tree.

On hearing of the King's death, his personal friends followed his example, and died with him. Biri committed suicide at Koso (where the King died), Omiran did the same. His cousin Omo Sándá committed suicide at Papo, Babayanmi at Sele, Obei at Jakuta and Oya his favourite wife at Irá.

Thus ended the life of this remarkable personage, who once ruled over all the Yorubas and Popos. He was afterwards deified, and is still worshipped by all of all Yoruba race as the god of thunder and lighting.

The King's Natural and Official Mothers

The Orun festival takes place in September . . . the rite seems to deal with affairs connected with the King's life. It is to him a periodic reminder of his coming apotheosis, and the emblem of worship is said to be a coffin made of or paved with clay in which he is to be buried. It is kept in charge of the "Iya Oba" (the King's official mother) in a room in her apartments, visited by no one, and the ceremonies are performed in private once a year by the King himself, his "mother" and his Osorun, the latter taking the chief part. . . .

. . . the Basorun is to divine with kola nuts, to see whether the King's sacrifices are acceptable to the celestials or not, if the omen be favourable the Alafin is to give the Basorun presents of a horse and other valuables; if unfavourable, he is to die, he has forfeited his right to further existence. But there can be no doubt that under such circumstances, it can always be managed between them that the omens be always favourable.

From this and other circumstances, it would appear that the King on this occasion occupies a humiliating position as one whose conduct is under review, hence the great privacy observed, for it is a cardinal principle with Yorubas that the Alafin, as the representative of the founder of the race, is to humble himself before no mortal; if such a contingency were to occur, he is to die.

Hence, no doubt, that his natural mother (if then living) is to make way for her son ascending the throne, so there will be no occasion to violate any filial duty imperative on a son who is at the same time the King. His majesty must be supreme.

. . . The *Iya-Oba* is the King's (official) mother . . . the King is not to have a natural mother. If his mother happens to be living when he is called to the throne, she is asked to "go to sleep," and is decently buried in the house of a relative in the city. All the inmates of that house are accorded special privileges and enjoy marked deference as "members of the household of the King's mother."

The King sends to worship at her grave once a year. One of the ladies of the palace is then created *Iya-Oba*, and she is supposed to act the part of a mother to him. It is her privilege to be the third person in the room where the King and the Basorun worship the Orun in the month of September every year.

Children Born to Die

There are some peculiar names given to a certain class of children called "Abiku" i.e. born to die. These are supposed to belong to a fraternity of demons living in the woods, especially about and within large Iroko trees; and each one of them coming into the world would have arranged beforehand the precise time he will return to his company.

Where a woman has lost several children in infancy, especially after a short period of illness, the deaths are attributed to this cause, and means are adopted to thwart the plans of these infants in order that they may stay; for if they can only tide over the pre-arranged date, they may go no more, and thus entirely forget their company. . . .

. . . Periodical feasts are usually made for these children of which beans and a liberal quantity of palm oil must form a principal dish. To this children of their age and others are invited, and their company of demons, although unseen are supposed to be present and partake of these viands. This is supposed to appease them and reconcile them to the permanent stay of their comrade, so that they may always have such to feed upon.

This superstition accounts for a rather high rate of infant mortality, for parents are thereby led away from the proper treatment of their ailments, while occupying themselves in making charms to defeat the purpose of imaginary demons! . . .

. . . Such children are called "Abiku" (born to die) and are supposed to belong to a company of young demons roaming about. They are believed to be capable of being born as young children, and (except forcibly detained by charms) of returning to their company at will, or at the instance of the members of their company.

Wearing the Death Cloth: The Funeral of the King

The Kings are buried in the Barà. The funeral usually takes place at night. It is notified to the public by the sounding of the Okinkin (a musical instrument like the bugle), the ivory trumpet, and the Koso drum, a drum which is usually beaten every morning at 4 a.m. as a signal for him

to rise from his bed; to beat it at night therefore, is to indicate that he is retiring to his final resting place.

The body is removed to the Barà on the back of those whose office it is to bury the Kings the chief of whom is a titled personage known as the Ona-onse-awo, and his lieutenants. At certain stations on the route between the palace and the Barà, eleven in all, they halt and immolate a man and a ram, and also at the Barà itself, four women each at the head and at the feet, two boys on the right and on the left, were usually buried in the same grave with the dead monarch to be his attendants in the other world, and last of all the lamp-bearer in whose presence all the ceremonies are performed.

All these practices, however, have long been abolished, a horse and a bullock being used instead of human beings.

. . . Additions are made to their number at every fresh burial, usually from among the favorites of the deceased husband. These women must all be celibates for life, unfortunately among the number are usually found some who are virgins and must remain so for life: any misbehaviour is punished with the death of both culprits, the man on the day the crime is detected, and the woman after her confinement.

Besides those who are immolated at the death of the sovereign there used to be some "honorable suicides" consisting of certain members of the royal family, and some of the King's wives, and others whose title implies that they are to die with the King whenever that event occurs. With the title they received as a badge a cloth known as the "death cloth," a beautiful silk damask wrapper, which they usually arrayed themselves with on special occasions during the King's lifetime. Although the significance of this was well-understood both by themselves and by their relatives, yet it is surprising to see how eager some of them used to be to obtain the office with the title and the cloth. They enjoyed great privileges during the King's lifetime. They can commit any crime with impunity. Criminals condemned to death and escaping to their houses become free. These are never immolated, they are to die honorably and voluntarily.

Of the members of the royal family and others to die were:—

1. The Aremo or Crown Prince who practically reigned with his father, enjoyed royal honors, and had equal power of life and death.
2. Three princes with hereditary titles viz., the Magaji Iyajin, the Agunpopo, and the Olusami.
3. Two titled personages not of royal blood viz., the Osi' wefa and the Olokun-esin (master of the horse) who is generally styled "Ab'obaku," i.e. one who is to die with the King.
4. The female victims were:—Iya Oba, the king's official mother; Iya Naso, Iyalagbon (the Crown Prince's mother); Iyale Molè (the Ifa priestess), the Olorun-ku-mefun, the Iyamonari, the Iya'-le-ori (these are all priestesses) and the Are-ori-ite the chief favorite.

It will be observed that all the above-mentioned are those who by virtue of their office are nearest to the King at all times, and have the easiest access to his person; to make their life dependent on his, therefore, is to ensure safety for him against the risk of poisoning, or the dagger of the assassin.

The custom is that each should go and die in his (or her) own home, and among his family. The spectacle is very affecting. Dressed in their "death cloth," they issue from the palace to their homes surrounded by their friends, and their drummers beating funeral dirges, eager crowds of friends and acquaintances flocking around them, pressing near to have a last look at them or to say the final farewell as they march homewards. The house is full of visitors, mourners and others, some in profuse tears; mournful wailings and funeral odes are heard on

all sides enough to break the stoutest heart. While the grave is digging, the coffin making, a parting feast is made for all the friends and acquaintances; and as they must die before sunset, they enjoy themselves as best they can for that day by partaking of the choicest and favorite dishes, appearing several times in changes of apparel, distributing presents with a lavish hand around, and making their last will disposing of their effects. When everything is ready, the grave and the coffin approved of, they then take poison, and pass off quietly. But if it fails or is too slow to take effect, and the sun is about to set, the last office is performed by the nearest relatives (by strangling or otherwise) to save themselves and the memory of their kin from indelible disgrace. The body is then decently buried by the relatives and the funeral obsequies performed.

In many cases voluntary suicides take place. Some of the King's favorite slaves who are not required to die often commit suicide in order to attend their master in the other world expecting to enjoy equally the emoluments of royalty in the other world as in this.

The End of King Adelu and Queen Alayoayo

King adelu did not attain to the age of his father. His accession was marked by confusion, wars, and rumours of war all over the country for about four years, due chiefly to the Ijaye war and its sequels: but after this peace and tranquility prevailed, except for the Ibadan raids and the subjugation of the Ijesa and Ekiti provinces.

Towards the end of his reign he met with an accident by being thrown off his horse, and as a consequence a prolonged illness ensued. After his convalescence he had an attack of paralysis which was probably due to internal injury sustained by the fall, but it was generally attributed to poison administered by the Crown Prince, who was impatient to come to the thrown; it was also said that his accomplice and agent was the King's favourite wife Alayoayo. . . . A few days after, the beating of the Koso drum and the blowing of the ivory trumpet at midnight announced to the public the death of their King.

Such an occasion was a time of dire distress in the palace, for apart from those who were bound by their special office to die with the King immolation was more or less indiscriminate in order to furnish the monarch with a large retinue in the other world. Hence every one tried to hide himself or herself in every nook and corner imaginable and in the ceilings of their apartments.

As an instance of the indiscriminate slaughter which occurred on this occasion we may mention the following:—

Kudefu the King's favourite Ilari and head of all his slaves on the morning of the death before it was officially announced went to know of his master's condition, and learning he was dead he was going home sad at heart to die of his own accord.

Alega the keeper of the gate seeing him coming from the inner apartments, being inquisitive, approached him to learn of their august master's condition. Kudefu at once unsheathed his sword saying "You go before, I am coming at your heels to be attendants on our master in the other world" and in one stroke he cut off his head and then coolly went home to die. Several who were too inquisitive lost their lives in this way. In that vast compound those in one corner of it may not know what was taking place in another.

It was also a time of mourning for the relatives of those who have received the "death cloth" knowing that they must have to bury in the evening a relative strong and healthy in the morning and up to the time the fatal cup is taken.

Alayoayo was very reluctant to die, and begged hard that her life should be spared, relying probably on the Crown Prince's promise to her. But in this she was sadly disappointed; for this reason she stayed much longer in the palace than she was expected to do, for according to custom she must die at home among her own people. When at last she knew that death was inevitable, she issued from the palace well-dressed in her "death cloth" with her drummer before and her maidens carrying large calabashes full of kola nuts, she trod her way homewards to the measures of the drum scattering kola nuts with a lavish hand right and left to the crowd of spectators thronging her way from the palace gates to her home, to have a last glance at her.

In the meantime a great feast had been made at her home for all friends and relatives to partake with her for the last, during which time the grave was in digging and the coffin made. She distributed her property among her relatives and her only son. When the hour was come she bade all farewell and repaired to her chamber and the fatal cup was placed in her hands. But owing to the preventives she had fortified her system with, the effects were neutralized; this was repeated again and again, with the same result. So towards sunset the disappointed relatives in order to prevent an indelible disgrace to the family had to strangle her, and then gave her a decent funeral. The same may be said more or less of all those who had received the "death cloth."

The Aremo (Crown Prince) also was told to die, but not only did he refuse point blank to do so but was also determined to ascend the throne. His grandfather had abolished the custom of the Aremo dying with the father, his own father the monarch now deceased was his father's Aremo and he succeeded him on the throne, and why then should he die?

But these customs are now dying out with the age especially since King Atiba in 1858 abolished that of the Crown Prince dying; the loss of experienced princes like the Iyajin around the throne is also felt irreparable. With the exception of the women, all the men now refuse to die and they are never forced to do so, but are superseded in their office if the next King wills it; they must then retire quietly from the city to reside in any town in the country in order to prevent the confusion of two individuals bearing the same title. As for the Crown Prince, he expects to succeed his father on the throne but if he is rejected by the king-makers, he also has to retire from the city.

Despotic and Rejected Kings: Ayibi

. . . An inter-regnum of some years followed the last reign, the affairs of the kingdom being left in the hands of the Basorun. The heir to the throne was the late King's grandson . . . Ayibi was crowned when he came of age. Unfortunately he proved unworthy of the honour and respect done him; he greatly disappointed the hopes of the nation. This may have been due to a great defect in his training when a minor, over-indulgence taking the place of strict discipline. He proved to be a tyrant who took delight in shedding blood. . . . For . . . acts of cruelty, an insurrection was stirred up against him by all the people, and being rejected he committed suicide. . . .

The reason why these Kings after rejection invariably committed suicide is this. The person of a King is regarded as sacred. Kings are venerated as gods, indeed many of them have been actually deified; but the moment a king's enormities provoke an open rebuke, or on being told publicly "We reject you," by the constitution of the country he must die that day. He cannot from the sanctity with which he has been regarded abdicate and continue to live as a private individual, or continue to reign by sufferance, by the clemency of aggrieved subjects. Hence he must die; and

by his own hands, for it is an unthinkable horror among the Yorubas for any man to lay hands upon a being regarded as sacred. It is the prerogative of the Basorun to utter the sentence of rejection when the people are determined on it.

Even Noblemen also from their exalted positions are never ordered to execution. "The King rejects you. The ancient Kings Oduduwa, Orañyan, Aganju, and others, reject you." He must then take poison and die. Such deaths are accounted honourable, public and decent funerals are accorded them.

If any one allows himself to be executed his carcase will be treated like that of a common felon, and his pulled down. Therefore a faint-hearted individual would be despatched by his nearest relatives to save themselves from indelible disgrace. An honourable burial will then be accorded to the illustrious dead.

Sources

[#11] Rev. Samuel Johnson, "The Kings of the Yoruba," from ed. Dr. O. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* [completed 1897] (Lagos, NG: C.M.S. Bookshops, 1921), Sango, pp. 34–36, 150–152; The King's Natural and Official Mothers, 48–49, 63; Children Born to Die, 83–84, 137; Wearing the Death Cloth, 54–57, 396–398; 57 (text interpolated); The Fate of Despots, 156–158; 169–170, 172–173.

[#12] Yoruba Laws and Customs: Suicide
(A. K. Ajisafe, 1924)

When a man finds life burdensome, disgraceful, and perilous to him, and consequently commits suicide he is given great credit and honour. But when out of shame for a mean act he commits suicide, his corpse is considered abominable and cast into the bush unburied.

(*a*) *Should a man or woman be provoked to commit suicide, the provoker is held responsible for the same. The penalty is a very heavy fine to be paid to the family of the victim or forfeiture of the provoker's life. The corpse of the suicide is not buried, but is removed to the house of the provoker till the judgment shall have been satisfied; then the corpse is taken over by the family, who bury it according to the rites and ceremonies for the burial of suicides.*

Source

[#12] A. K. Ajisafe, "Yoruba Laws and Customs: Suicide," from *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People* (London: Routledge; Lagos, NG: C.M.S. Bookshop, 1924), preface; p. 32 [field date 1906 ff.].

IGBO

[#13] Evil Spirits: The Suicide
(Northcote W. Thomas, 1913)

Among the Ibo . . . the evil spirit known as akalagoli, ekwensu or ajomwo excites the apprehensions of the people.

The akalagoli is said to be a person who had no wife, no child, and no money, and has committed suicide. They try to kill others after death, and more especially fortunate people. . . .

. . . Occasionally, one may see various devices in a house for catching akalagoli, or for driving them away. A pot with a broom in it is placed against the wall just inside the door; or a forked stick hangs from part of the framework that supports the roof of the wall and so on. The akalagoli is supposed to catch its foot in the fork of this stick—exactly as the witch is supposed to be caught in the witch's ladder in England—and every month a fire of palm flowers is lighted to expel the akalagoli. Ordinarily, however, it is held to be sufficient to light palm flowers over the spot where the akalagoli or ekwensu is buried and to renew the ceremony every month.

Occasionally a person dead within comparatively recent years can be identified as an akalagoli, the remedy is to dig the body up. When this is done the doctor gets medicine, draws a circle round the grave, plants his horn upon it and runs round it; all this to secure that the akalagoli does not escape. Then he takes a piece of earth and rubs the heart of the dead man and burns it. He cuts off the head and cuts up the body.

Source

[#13] Northcote W. Thomas, "Evil Spirits," from, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*, Part I: Law and Custom of the Ibo of the Awka Neighbourhood, S. Nigeria (London: Harrison and Sons, 1913; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), pp. 39–40.

[#14] Sacrifices, Death, and Burial (in Archive only) (G. T. Basden, 1938)

[#15] A Murderer Must Hang Himself

Homicide is an offense against the earth deity. If a villager is involved, the murderer is expected to hang himself, after which the daughters of the village perform the rite of sweeping away the ashes of murder. If the murderer has fled, his extended family must also flee, and the property of all is subject to raids. When the murderer is eventually caught, he is required to hang himself to enable the [daughters of the village] to perform their rites. It is important to realize that the village has no power to impose capital punishment. In fact, no social group or institution has this power. Everything affecting the life of the villager is regulated by custom. The life of the individual is highly respected; it is protected by the earth-goddess. The villagers can bring social pressure, but the murderer must hang himself.

Source

[#15] Victor C. Uchendu, "A Murderer Must Hang Himself," from *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 42–43.

[#16] An Old Woman's Pre-Arranged Funeral (G. T. Basden, 1921)

Holding the most profound belief in the supernatural, the Ibo is deeply conscious of his relationship to the unseen world, and every precaution must be observed in order to keep the spirit of the

departed in a state of peaceful contentment. The Ibo will endure everything demanded of him in this life; will put up with hardships, the misbehaviour of his children, indeed anything, in order to insure that his burial will be properly performed. His whole future welfare depends upon this, and hence it takes, at all times, a most prominent place in a man's calculations.

In certain districts it was formerly by no means rare to find that a woman had made arrangements whereby she died before reaching the period of enforced inactivity. There was the perpetual dread lest she should be unable to secure a guarantee or leave sufficient property whereby she might be sure of a worthy burial. To relieve her mind she would strive to accumulate the necessary funds and then, divining that the days of her decline were near, she would enter into an agreement with her son, or some other young man, in which he undertook to fulfill all her wishes in connection with her burial, she, on her part, duly compensating him for all the expense and trouble involved. These preliminaries having been mutually settled, the woman either poisoned herself or the draught was administered to her, in order that the final rites in connection with the second burial might be fulfilled with as little delay as possible.

. . . When men have run their course in this world they return to their master—the Supreme Being—and live with him in the spirit world. In their spiritual state they are endowed with never-ending life, and, until the ceremony of second burial has been observed, they continue to haunt this world, wandering at will in the houses, compound and farms, invisible, yet ever present, and taking a distinct and unremitting interest in the affairs of the individual and the community with which they associated in life. After the rites of second burial have been completed the "spirits" depart to their appointed place and rest in peace until their reincarnation, i.e. as long as they behave themselves.

Source

[#16] G. T. Basden, "An Old Woman's Prearranged Funeral," from *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1921; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 117–119.

ZULU

[#17] The Timely Death

The importance of the shades in Zulu life and thinking cannot be overestimated. . . . The few variations in thinking that may be traced are related to differences in rural and urban settings and the tendency for urbanized Zulu to be more sophisticated in their thinking. It is true that the symbol through which thinking is expressed at times may change, largely due to local conditions of life. But the interpretation given to the symbol is, again, remarkably uniform. Zulu living in the stone-covered areas of the Msinga district bury their dead with a stone place at the feet, over the head and under the knees of the corpse, while people in a district where stones are not plentiful will use pieces of broken clay vessels for the same purpose. But both the stones and the pieces of burnt clay are interpreted similarly. "He is like a stone. So we are burying him with stones," was said in the Msinga district, while people living in the stone-lacking area, defining their symbol, said: "The dead man is like the hard clay which is the vessel. It is stone-like. . . That is why we bury him with these things. They are no good to us any more. His body is no good any more. The clay and the corpse are the same.". . .

The existence and presence of the shades is not doubted. They are a reality which is so strongly interwoven into kinship relations that a world without them is not possible. Faith is not

in the first instance approached critically. It is generously inclusive. It is only of recent date that scepticism is finding its way into Zulu thought-patterns and expressed essentially among intellectuals, particularly those in urban settings. . . .

Death

There are essentially two concepts of death. Firstly, a timely death which presupposes a number of children and grandchildren who survive the deceased. Secondly, there is death which is untimely and is regarded as a serious interference in a human's life. The quality of such a death is included in the English idioms annihilation or extinction. A timely death is in the Zulu language expressed by terms such as *ukugoduka, ukudlula, ukuhamba* and *ukuqubeka*, which all give notions of a passing on, a continuation. An untimely death is described as *ukufa, ukubhubha*, and *ukugqibuka* which imply a breaking off of life.

Ngema [an informant] was emphatic that physical death, when it comes at the correct time in life, is in itself not evil. It is to be regarded as a natural continuation of man's existence. "When a man has completed his work in that he is old and of ripe age, then he is happy because things have gone well with him. He sees that there will be those that will do his work for him (ref. to ritual killings) when he has passed on. So he is not fearful because of death. He can even say to his people, 'No, I am now tired of living.' He says this because there is nothing more he can do." Discussions with a great number of Zulu on the issue of death at a mature age indicates that Ngema was not expressing only personal views but ideas representative of the people.

When old people die they are not mourned. "To the old death does not come unexpectedly. We do not mourn them because we knew that it was coming. They were not taken unaware." People expressing sympathy with friends whose aged parents or senior relatives have passed away show no signs of grief and will say: "We do not say anything. He was of ripe age." Or they may say: "Do not complain. It was her turn now. Even the teeth revealed that eating was painful." "You must not weep. Did you not know that he was ready for this thing? So why are you distressed?"

Death of an aged person is not of necessity considered the work of sorcery or witchcraft. It is a natural development and accepted as such.

Literature on the Zulu makes mention of the now obsolete custom of *ukugodusa*, sending the aged further. Informants who have knowledge of this custom agree that it was by no means common although done occasionally. It was certainly not looked upon as cruel. Informants themselves accepted the custom as intelligible, saying that they did not see anything wrong with it other than that "today the magistrate and the police do not allow it." An old man who had been messenger at the battle of Ulundi said that one of his father's brothers had been treated thus. He recollected hearing the man asking his sons to *godusa* him "since he had no teeth and not even the sun could warm him any more." After a few days the old man was no longer seen in the homestead and nobody inquired about him, "everybody knowing what had been done."

Source

[#17] Axel-Ivar Berglund, "The Timely Death," from *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1976), pp. 78–81.

[#18] Godusa: The Old Woman and the Ant-bear's Hole
(R. C. A. Samuelson, 1929)

Here is an instance of a custom of the Zulus, which civilisation would naturally characterise as cruel, but which, with the Zulus was considered merciful. There was a kraal named KwaMbaza, about three miles from St. Paul's Mission Station, and the chief man in charge was a headman called Mazwi. In this kraal there lived an old woman who was well over a hundred years, whose name was Mfotho. Mother, who was a great walker, used to visit this, among other kraals in connection with mission work, accompanied by one of the mission station Christian girls, taking medicines if required.

This old woman came out to see mother, and the two became great friends. Mother gave her a blanket to keep her old body warm, for she had been provided with very scanty covering. The old lady totteringly danced before Mother and thanked her for the gift, and whenever Mother came thereafter Mfotho used to dance, and, to encourage her, the people of the kraal used to applaud her by shouting "Mfotho." On the last occasion mother went to this kraal Mfotho failed to appear, so Mother enquired what was the matter with her, and in what hut she was. The cool answer was, "She has gone home, she was placed in that ant-bear's hole yonder." This failed to satisfy Mother's enquiry, so she pressed her question, and this is the account she received. "Mfotho was so old that we decided to help her to 'go home,' so one day we told her to come out of her hut and walk to an ant-bear's hole yonder to be buried; she did not object, but came along with snuff box which had been used by her to hold her snuff many years. When she arrived near the hole, she asked to be allowed to sit down and have a snuff, and she was allowed to do so. When she had finished snuffing she put her snuff box into a small bag which hung from her loins, stood up and said, 'I am now ready; I am going.' She moved to the edge of the hole, and was pushed into it and buried alive." Mother was so shocked that she never visited that kraal again.

It was a general custom of the Zulus to "godukisa" or "godusa" old people in this manner. They never said a very old person had died; but they used to say "Usegodukile," "he has now gone home." Anyway, it was not an ideal way of dying or going home. It is, moreover, strange that the Zulu, who had no idea of future home according to our way of thinking, and had no knowledge of the immortality of the soul, except that it lived in Idhlozi, "Snake" should have coined and used that expression. Maybe it was coined at a time that their creed was different to that which they later adopted. It may be, of course, that they referred to the rendezvous of the spirits of their ancestors, the Amadhlozi.

Source

[#18] R. C. A. Samuelson, "*Godusa*: The Old Woman and the Antbear's Hole," from *Long, Long Ago* (Durban, ZA: Knox Printing and Publishing Co., 1929), pp. 37–38.

[#19] Ukugodusa: The First Woman Who Became a Christian
(L. H. Samuelson, 1912)

There are many, no doubt, who know of the old cruel Zulu custom of "Ukugodusa" (sending home), i.e., doing away with the aged people. If a man was too old and feeble to go to the king's

kraal occasionally, and join his regiment whenever called out, the king would pick out a troop of men and say, "Hamba niye kum'godusa"—meaning "go and send him home." Then this troop of men would travel miles away to the man's kraal, taking good care to get there by night, and to surround it, so as to pounce upon the poor old fellow as soon as he came out of his hut in the morning, and take him away to bury alive or otherwise kill him. The victim simply had to go away obediently, knowing it was the king's order, as well as the custom of his country. So all Zulu men, old and young, used to make a point of meeting at the king's kraal, "Komkulu" (at the great one's), especially at Christmas time, to show that they were still of service. If through illness they had to stay at home, and it could be proved that they were indisposed, the king excused them; but they were most careful not to let it happen again.

When women became helpless, and needed looking after, they, too, had to be "sent home," and that was done by their own people. Even their own sons would order it to be done, and assist in the cruel performance. . . . "Ukugodusa," one is thankful to know, is out of date now, as well as illegal.

I feel that it would, perhaps, be wise to give one more proof to show that the above was a real custom amongst Zulus, even as lately as in the days of King Cetshwayo. A poor old woman named Madokodo was another victim, besides Mfoto whom I mentioned before. Sometime in the beginning of 1869 Madokodo, on account of her old age, was thrown into a donga, or pit, by one of her sons and his friends, to get her out of the way, or send her home (godusa), as this was called. The poor old body was not in her second childhood (as Mfoto was), but was healthy and strong. She was in this pit for a few days, trying to get out, but kept falling back again. When night came she was in terror of the wolves and tigers which were prowling about the place; but she knew there was a Great God above, and she prayed for His protection. At last she managed to scrape a few holes in the donga with her finger nails, and made steps to climb up by, and the Great Almighty (Usomandhla) gave her strength to get out. Then she went to a great friend of hers, who fed her and kept her in a secret corner of her kraal until she got over her shock and became strong again. Madokodo then went to one of her other sons by night, and he was much pleased as well as surprised to see his mother alive; but, fearing the elder and cruel brother might find her and try to carry out this cruel custom again, he thought it best not to keep her with him long, so he proposed taking her to a mission station and giving her to the missionary. The mother agreed to this, and the two went off together, traveling a good many miles till they reached St. Paul's Mission Station, the missionary there being my father, Rev. S. M. Samuelson. Arriving at the door of our house, poor old Madokodo, lame and footsore, called out in a pleading voice, "Ngitola Baba," "Ngitola Nkosi Yame!" which means, "Adopt me, Father," "Adopt me, my Master." My father inquired into the matter, and all was related, her loving son supporting her. Nothing could be done but to save the poor old soul from future trouble, and to try to win her for Christ's Kingdom. My father took her under his care on August 13th, 1869, and the son took leave of his mother and returned home again. Madokodo slept in the kitchen, and my mother took great interest in her, for she was very intelligent, industrious and tidy. After a while Madokodo expressed a wish to join the Catechumen class, and be prepared for Baptism. She was very earnest; for early in the morning, just about sunrise, we children heard her deep, pleading voice in prayer whilst we were still in our beds, "Baba wami Opezulu, ovele wa ngibheka, osangibhekile namanje, ngitola Mdali wami, tola nabanta bami, utetelele nalo

ongilahlileyo!" (My Father above, Thou Who hast taken care of me from the very first, and Who art still caring for me, adopt me, my Creator, adopt also my children, and forgive the one who has thrown me away.") Then she would always finish with "The Lord's Prayer," which she had by then learnt. At the end of eight months she was baptized, and received the named Eva. She was, I believe, the first old woman who became a Christian at St. Paul's, and she was very happy after that, and helped in the mission work by setting an excellent example to the younger converts. News of the aged woman's conversion and baptism spread all over the country like wildfire, for Zulus, as a rule, are great news carriers. Her wicked son heard of it, for he had hoped she had reached her destination long ago, as he had "sent her home." The middle-aged people bore her a grudge on account of her having become a Christian at her age, and, fearing others might do the same, clubbed together and made plans to get her out the way; so they accused her of witchcraft and reported her to King Cetshwayo. Eva at this time had had someone to help to build her a small hut, and she was cutting some high grass (tambootie) near a certain kraal, with which to thatch it. Meanwhile, illness (influenza colds) breaking out at this kraal, poor old Eva was accused of having caused this. The King, through his Prime Minister, Mnyamana, granted permission to have her killed. On the 4th of June, 1870 (Trinity Sunday), as we were just coming out of church, we were surprised by a large party of men (thirty in number) meeting us outside the church door, armed with assagais and knobkerries, with a demand from the King that Eva should be handed over to them to be killed! Eva ran to her protector (my father), calling out, "Save me, save me!" and caught hold of him round the waist, and the men pulling her away by force nearly tore his coat tails off. Then my younger brother Robert (R. C. Samuelson) interfered, and took hold of the woman, calling out, "Muyeke bo!" (leave her); then one man, indignant with this interference, lifted up his knobkerrie over Robert's head, shouting: "Ngase ngiliqumuze ikanda kona manje" (I will break your skull this moment); then, of course, the poor woman had to go. She was driven by these thirty men six miles into the thorn country to river called Idango, near the Umblatuzi river. We sat on the mountain, all of us, watching the long procession, Eva leading, the row of cruel humanity following in a long string. We watched and prayed broken-hearted, for we all loved poor old Eva; but it was a comfort to know she was a Christian! At last when we could see them no more we returned home, too dispirited to dine that day. In the evening someone told us she had met her fate bravely. As she went along she prayed to be received in the Heavenly Home of rest, where all unkindness and cruelty will end! At Idango river they drove her to a very big pond, where crocodiles were often seen; there they lifted up their kerries to brain her. She then said, "Ngogoduka *impela* namhla!" ("I will, of a surety (indeed), go home to-day!") They then killed her and threw her into the pond for the crocodiles to eat.

Such was life in Zululand before the Zulu war. And yet on the whole things had, in a way, improved since Tshaka's and Dingane's days. The life of a missionary with his family was not at all an enviable one, although the natives had great respect for them, knowing as they did that lived in their country as friends and messengers of the Gospel. They liked the missionary, although they objected to his religion.

Source

[#19] L. H. Samuelson (Nomleti), "Ukugodusa: The First Woman Who Became a Christian," from *Some Zulu Customs and Folk-Lore* (London: Church Printing Company, 1912), pp. 11–17.

[#20] The Burial of a King
(R. C. A. Samuelson, 1929)

When a king dies the fact is kept secret for quite three months, and people are simply told that Inkosi Iyadunguzela, "the king is ailing." So soon as he is dead a black bull is killed and its hide wrapped round the king, all over, and he is sewn into it and as it dries tightens up. . . . The nobility, consisting of those who were members of his Executive, carry him to the grave—perfect silence is observed while he is being carried to the grave. The grave is a very large one, and a special niche in the side of the grave is cut out for placing his body in. His personal household servants, "Izinceku," enter the grave and receive him and place him in his last resting place. All attire he has worn and articles he has used are buried with him, but laid a little distance away from him. The king's favourite wife, an Inceku, "personal servant," who used to wash his feet, and another Inceku, who used to eat what the king left, are, or used to be, buried alive with the king, sometimes they were killed and then buried. With some kings it is said that a wife holding a mat for making his bed, another holding a snuff-box with snuff, another holding a calabash with water for him to drink, were buried with him. King Mpande's Prime Minister, Masipula, was arranging to have such women and men buried with King Mpande, when he was about to be buried, but King Cetewayo stopped him doing so.

Source

[#20] R. C. A. Samuelson, "The Burial of a King," from *Long, Long Ago* (Durban, ZA: Knox Printing and Publishing Co., 1929), p. 291.

BANYORO

[#21] The Ghost of a Suicide
(John Roscoe, 1923)

Though there were certain spirits which were feared, there was no knowledge of a spirit-world or of any spirits created apart from this world: the people stood in constant awe only of disembodied spirits of men, the ghosts. . . . If the ghost was neglected or any member of the family did anything of which he did not approve, he would manifest his displeasure by causing illness or death among the people or the cattle. Powerful ghosts might also be persuaded by members of their families to cause illness to some person of another clan in revenge for some wrong. Sickness was always supposed to be caused either by ghosts or by magic; and a medicine-man had to be summoned to find out the cause by augury, for the treatment varied with the cause.

People who had no property and no power in this world were not generally feared when they became ghosts, for they were thought to have as little power then as before, and no steps were taken to keep their ghosts in good temper. The ghosts of some poor people, however, might be dangerous, owing to the circumstances of their death. For example, a sick man who came to beg for food and was refused might, should he die in the neighbourhood from want, cause some evil. If an epidemic broke out or someone fell ill shortly afterwards, the misfortune was attributed to this ghost and offerings were made to propitiate him.

The ghost of anyone who had been wrongfully accused and had committed suicide was very dangerous, even the ghost of a woman being feared under these circumstances. A woman who

had been wrongfully accused of adultery would go and hang herself, and her ghost would then be a malignant influence. Her body was buried as near the place of her death as possible that the ghost might be destroyed or confined to that locality. If she hanged herself on a tree, the body was buried just clear of the roots, the tree was cut down and its roots were dug up; the whole was then burned to ashes and the relatives had to pay ample compensation to the chief on whose land the deed had been done.

Source

[#21] John Roscoe, "The Ghost of a Suicide," from *The Bakitara or Banyoro* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1923), pp. 41–42.

DINKA

[#22] The Folktale of the Four Truths (in Archive only)

[#23] Burial Alive: The Master of the Fishing-Spear

When a master of the fishing-spear has fallen sick and is becoming weak, he will call all his people and tell them to bring his whole camp (tribe or subtribe) to his home to bury him whilst he lives. His people will obey him quickly come, for if they delay and the master of the fishing-spear dies before they reach him, they will be most miserable. . . .

[An informant relates . . .]

. . . I first saw a master of the fishing-spear called Deng Deng buried alive in the land of the Majok tribe across the river. I was only a boy. . . .

The master of the fishing-spear Deng Deng was becoming very old, and when his years were finished and he was very old indeed, so that he could not see well and all his teeth had fallen out, he told his lineage that he wished to be buried alive, and that they should go and tell the people of the country and see if they agreed.

They prepared the ground for his burial at a very ancient cattle-camp site called Malwal, which was also hard by the homestead of Deng Deng and near his cattle-byre. So it was at his very own original home [*panden nhom*, literally 'the head of his home']. The clan which cleared and dug the ground was Padiangbar; it is that clan which buries a master of the fishing-spear alive in my country.

They dug a very big hole on the highest point of the cattle-camp site, in the middle of the cattle. Next to it were two bulls, a big white one and a red one. They were the whole beasts of the clan-divinities *Mon* Grass and Flesh. When the hole had been dug, they made two platforms [frameworks] of *akoc* wood, which had been fetched by the young men of Padiangbar from far away in the forest, as much as a day's journey distant.

They worked for three days, and the old man was still above the ground. They honoured the bulls with songs for two days, speaking invocations each day in the morning and the evening. Then the masters of the fishing-spear of Pakedang, along with those of Paketoi and Pagong, slit the throats of the bulls at about 10 o'clock. Deng Deng's mother was the daughter of a woman of Paketoi and his mother's father was of the clan Pagong. So they were all there together, to join together his father's and his maternal uncle's families (*bi panerden mat kek pan e wun*).

Deng Deng made invocations over the bulls, and the horns of the first bull, the white one, sank forwards to the ground. When the bull had been killed, they took its skin and cut it into strips, and made a bed from it on the framework. And every day they made a feast (*cam yai*) and danced inside the cattle-byre during the daytime, and outside at night. And men slept in the byre with other men's wives, and everyone agreed to this [literally 'and there was no bad word'].

They then placed a war-shield, made from the hide of a bull of the clan-divinity which had been killed in the past, on the top of the bed. It was a war-shield which had for long been kept in the byre, and which the people had anointed with butter every spring and autumn, during the 'dividing months.' They placed Deng Deng on the shield and lowered him into the grave.

The red (brown) bull remained. When Deng Deng had been lowered into the hole, they made a platform over him, and so arranged it that the top of the platform was level with the surface of the ground. They sang hymns, and after the singing was finished they made an enclosure of *dhot* wood around the grave. The enclosure was about twice the area of the surface of the grave, and of such a height that a man could just see over it if he tried. Then they took cattle-dung and partly covered over the top of the grave, leaving part uncovered so that his voice could be heard. From his grave, Deng Deng called the older men together outside the enclosure, and all the women and children, even his own wives, were sent away. . . .

While the master of the fishing-spear still speaks, they do not cover the grave with dung. But when he no longer replies when they address him, they heap up the dung over him. And when it has all sunk in, they make a shrine. Some people may then say 'The master of the fishing-spear has died,' but they will usually say 'The master has been taken into the earth.' And nobody will say 'Alas, he is dead!' They will say 'It is very good.' . . .

The fundamental principle, clear in all accounts, is that certain masters of the fishing-spear must not or should not be seen to enter upon physical death and the debility which precedes it in the same way as ordinary men or domestic animals. Their deaths are to be, or are to appear, deliberate, and they are to be the occasion of a form of public celebration.

. . . the ceremonies described in no way prevent the ultimate recognition of the ageing and physical death of those for whom they are performed. This death is recognized; but it is the public experience of it, for the survivors, which is deliberately modified by the performance of these ceremonies. It is clear also that this is the Dinka intention in performing the rites. They do not think that they have made their masters of the fishing-spear personally immortal by burying them before they have become corpses or, in some accounts, by anticipating their deaths by ritual killing. The expressions used for the deaths of masters of the fishing-spear are euphemisms for an event which is fully admitted. In my experience they are not even inevitably used, though a Dinka would prefer to say gently 'The master has gone to the earth' or 'The master has gone to sit,' rather than 'The master has died,' particularly at the time of death. These euphemisms replace the involuntary and passive connotations of the ordinary verb for 'to die' (*thou*) by expressions suggesting a positive act. Similarly (though this point is not specifically made in any of the accounts) when we hear that the people 'bury their master of the fishing-spear' it is as an alternative to 'letting him die.' In other words, the deliberately contrived death, though recognized as death, enables them to avoid admitting in this case the involuntary death which is the lot of ordinary men and beasts. Further,

it is not the master of the fishing-spear who 'kills' himself, though he requests or receives a special form of death. The action to avoid, for him, the mere deprival of life which death represents for ordinary Dinka, is action taken by his people. And, as we see in most of the accounts given, their intention is not primarily to undertake the special ceremonies for *his* sake, but for their own.

Source

[#23] Godfrey Lienhardt, "Burial Alive: The Master of the Fishing-Spear," from *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 300–303, 313–314; quotations in introductory passage from pp. 304, 309.

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HINDU WIDOW, ANONYMOUS (c. 1889)

The Plight of Hindu Widows as Described by a Widow Herself (expanded in Archive)

This anonymous selection was originally published in the Methodist Church Missionary Society's magazine The Gospel in All Lands *in April of 1889. Little is known about its author or its exact date of composition, except that the author, "a widow herself," identifies herself as a member of the Kayastha caste, living in the Punjab. The caste is a community of scribes, highly educated and historically very influential, and of well-to-do economic status.*

Sati *or* suttee*, as the British called it, also known as widow-burning, in which the new widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre, was practice with apparent antecedents as far back as the 5th century A.D. or even earlier [q.v., Vedas]. The practice has never been universal among Hindus, and it does not always involve fire: for instance, the Bengali Jogi weaver caste and the Jasnathi caste in Rajasthan buried the wife alive with her husband.* Sati *stones or grave markers often served as sites of veneration, and were known throughout India by the 10th century. Rulers during the Mughal period attempted to suppress the practice but without lasting success, and it reached the greatest rates of frequency in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1813, the British East India Company recognized the legitimacy of* sati *as long as it was based on the widow's "consent," not coercion. Between 1813 and 1828, the period during which the British collected statistics on* sati*, approximately 8,000 widows were burnt. The practice was banned by the Bengal presidency in 1829 and upheld by the British Privy Council in 1832; statistics were not kept after that time, though the decree affected only some areas of India and that portion of the population where British rule was in sway. In 1856, the law was also amended to allow widows to remarry, but the Social Reform Movement found that traditional custom could not be undone overnight and that opposition to the continuing practice of* sati *was necessary. Although it is now illegal to attempt to commit* sati *or to glorify or abet it, it still occasionally occurs in rural areas of India.*

"The Plight of Hindu Widows" is a distinctly graphic and disturbing account arising from the body of literature written in the second half of the 19th century focusing on the issue of widow remarriage and with it the question of women's rights in India; it is significant in that it presents a view of sati *not from the vantage point of European male observers, who were almost universally unsympathetic and disapproving (though often fascinated by the beauty of the doomed wife), but from that of an Indian woman who could have undergone* sati *herself.*

Sati *is sometimes conceptualized as a form of suicide, sometimes as a form of social murder. Earlier treatments of* sati *in Hindu literature had sometimes romanticized it (e.g., in Bana's* Harsha-Carita *[q.v.], where the queen's death is portrayed as a devout and fully voluntary choice against the opposition of her son, a religiously inspired act of devotion to her dead husband in the expectation of reward and reunion in the afterlife, though Bana was himself opposed to the practice). In popular belief, it is claimed,* sati *is said to be painless and will remove the sins of seven generations in a woman's family, and she will not be reborn as a woman. In "The Plight of Hindu Widows," in contrast, the practice of* sati *is seen by its widow author as an unwelcome alternative, though still preferable to the vicious social*

treatment experienced by widows, a treatment that she describes as a lifelong, slow death compared to sati*'s quick but cruel death. Thus a widow might knowingly, even voluntarily, choose death by* sati *rather than the life that would otherwise await her after the death of her husband, even though the alleged voluntariness of her choice is severely compromised by oppressive social circumstances.*

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Anonymous, "The Plight of Hindu Widows as Described by a Widow Herself," Methodist Church Missionary Society, *The Gospel in All Lands*, 1889, pp. 160–162, tr. Maya Pandit, in *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991, pp. 358-363). Material in introduction also from Lata Mani, "Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning," from Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, 1992, Ch. 22, pp. 392–408; and Christine Everaert.

from THE PLIGHT OF HINDU WIDOWS AS DESCRIBED BY A WIDOW HERSELF

There are four major castes among the Hindus and I was born into the caste known as Kayastha, which is the third in the hierarchy and most infamous for its maltreatment of widows.

Widows anywhere have to suffer, but the customs in our caste are too terrible. The people in the Punjab don't treat their widows so strictly. But we do not belong to the Punjab. Originally we migrated from the northwest and settled there. And since ours is a well-to-do, why, even wealthy, caste, our regulations in this regard are extremely strict.

Once the husband dies, the torture of his wife begins, as if the messengers of the death god Yama themselves have come to take away her soul. None of her relatives will touch her to take her ornaments off her body. That task is assigned to three women from the barber caste. Their number varies from three to six. No sooner does the husband breathe his last than those female fiends literally jump all over her and violently tear all the ornaments from her nose, ears, etc. In that rush, the delicate bones of the nose and ears are sometimes broken. Sometimes while plucking the ornaments from her hair, tufts of hair are also plucked off. If she is wearing any gold or silver ornaments, these cruel women never have the patience to take them off one by one; they pin her hands down on the ground and try to break the bangles with a large stone. And many a time her hands are severely wounded in the process. Why, these callous women torture even a six- or seven-year-old girl, who doesn't even know what a husband means when she becomes a widow!

At such times grief crashes down on the poor woman from all sides. On the one hand she has to endure the grief of the husband's death, and on the other hand, no one comes near her to console her. On the contrary, those who had loved her from her childhood, and had brought her up tenderly, even they shower curses on her. In our caste, it is the custom that all the women accompany men when the corpse is carried for cremation. Everyone has to walk even though they are wealthy and have carriages. The menfolk walk in front and women follow them, clad in veils. And the poor widow follows them all. She is supported by the barber women. There has to be a distance of two hundred feet between her and the rest of the women because it is

believed by our people that if her shadow falls over a married woman, she too will become a widow. It doesn't affect the barber women, who torture her, however, in the same fashion. Because of this stupid superstition, even a relative whose heart melts at the sight of her doesn't dare to look at her. But people are not satisfied even when they have tortured her so much. They brand her heart further as if with red-hot irons. Several men keep on shouting in that procession, asking people to stay away from her, and the barber women literally drag her along throughout the walk.

The place for cremation is usually on the bank of a river or a lake. When the procession reaches the site, the widow is pushed into the water. She has to lie there till the corpse is burned to ashes and all the people have had their bath and dried their clothes. When people are ready to go home, they pull her out of the water. Whether the water is cold as ice or the sun scorches down fiercely, she has to stay there until everyone has finished. Nobody takes pity on her. Even on the way back home, she is dragged along throughout. Because of such things, women prefer to burn themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. If the poor woman falls ill on such occasions, nobody even thinks of giving her medicine. . . .

. . . It is the custom that a widow should eat only once a day for a year after her husband's death; apart from that, she also has to fast completely on several days. Other relatives also eat only once a day. But only for fifteen days. After returning from the cremation ground, she has to sit on the ground in a corner, without changing her clothes, whether dry or wet. Nobody, apart from the barber women, visits her. If her own relatives are poor, even they don't come to see her. She has to sit alone. Oh, cruel corner, all of us widows know you so thoroughly well. And we never remember you unless we are grieved.

A woman whose husband is dead is like a living corpse. She has no rights in the home. In spite of her grief, her relatives brand her with frightening words and gestures. Though she is all alone there and not allowed to speak to anyone, her relatives go to her and pierce her with sharp words. Her mother says, "What a mean creature! I don't think there is anyone more vile than she. It would have been better if she were never born!" Her mother-in-law says, "This horrible snake bit my son and killed him. He died, but why is this worthless woman still alive?" There are even other widows among the women who speak cruelly to her! They feel that if they don't speak so, people, and God too, would think that they actually pitied her. The sister-in-law says, "I will not cast even a glance at this luckless, ill-fated creature! I will not even speak a word to her," Those who come to console the relatives of the dead say to the mother of the dead man, "Mother, this monstrous woman has ruined your house. She must be cursed. It's only because of her that you have been thrown into the ocean of grief!" And to the widow they say, "Now, what do you want to live for?" If she wails aloud, they say, "What a shameless woman! How callous! She cries because she wants a husband." Thus, she has to spend those thirteen days of grief in that alcove. What an unendurable state! No one can understand how painful it is unless she experiences it.

On the eleventh day, the Brahmin comes. He comes like a policeman to arrest a convict. And then he authoritatively demands money or oil and so on. The widow has to pay him even if she is very poor; if she cannot pay immediately, she has to promise him that she will pay in future. Even if the widow is exceedingly poor, she has to pay at least thirteen rupees. Other Brahmins demand other things. They demand more if the family is a rich one. Sometimes the widows have to work as servants doing household jobs, to earn money to pay these Brahmins their dues.

Thus, there is nothing in our fate but suffering from birth to death. When our husbands are alive, we are their slaves; when they die, our fate is even worse.

The thirteenth day is the most fateful, the worst day for the widow. Though on this day she is allowed to change the clothes she has been wearing since her husband's death and have a bath, people continue to condemn her. Her relatives gather around her and place some money before her. This is supposed to be for her keep. They curse her a million times while doing so. If the money gathered is a large sum, one of her relatives takes it into his possession and doles it out to her in small installments.

Then the Brahmin comes again to demand money. The Brahmin and the barber women have to be paid again when the widow's head is shaved. After six weeks, she is again given the very clothes she had been wearing for the first thirteen days. When she sees those clothes again, she shudders from head to toe, as if she has been widowed again. Then she is sent on a pilgrimage to the Holy Ganges, and those clothes are thrown into the river after she has taken a holy dip in it.

After one year, if the widow is staying with her parents, she may be allowed to wear some ornaments. If asked about the reason, the parents say, "How long can our daughter continue not wearing ornaments? How can we bear to see her sit like that before us, wearing none, when we ourselves wear so many?"

Those widows who have lost their parents, however, have a terrible fate. They have to remain as slaves to their brothers' wives or even sons. People feel there is no need to employ a servant if there is a widow in the house. If the widow has a sister-in-law (her brother's wife), she has to suffer harassment at her hands. They constantly quarrel. Her fate isn't any different in her husband's family. Her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law hate her and often beat her. If she decides to separate and live independently because of the frequent quarrels, her honor is maligned. If she has any children, she has to toil hard for their upkeep. And when they grow up and get married, she becomes a slave to their wives. If a widow does not have any children, her relatives make her adopt a male child. He becomes heir to her property. And when he grows up and gets married, he is ruled by his wife and provides his adopted mother only with food and clothing. The widow has no right whatsoever to any property she may have. In such a condition, it is better for her if she earns her own living by working for others as a domestic servant.

. . . If a woman dies when her husband is still alive, her body is decorated with ornaments and new clothes, and then cremated. But when a widow dies, her body is just wrapped up in plain white cloth and cremated. It is reasoned that if a widow goes to the other world in ornaments and new clothes, her husband will not accept her there.

Thousands of widows die after a husband's death. But far more have to suffer worse fates throughout their life if they stay alive. Once, a widow who was a relative of mine died in front of me. She had fallen ill before her husband died. When he died, she was so weak that she could not even be dragged to her husband's cremation. She had a burning fever. Then her mother-in-law dragged her down from the cot onto the ground and ordered the servant to pour bucketfuls of cold water over her. After some eight hours, she died. But nobody came to see how she was when she was dying of the cold. After she died, however, they started praising her, saying that she had died for the love of her husband.

Another woman jumped from the roof of her house and committed suicide when she heard that her husband had died away from home. I and many of her other friends knew that this woman had never gotten along well with her husband. They used to quarrel often. Yet people praised her

for committing suicide. If all these tales are put together, it would make a large book. The British government put a ban on the custom of sati, but as a result of that several women who could have died a cruel but quick death when their husbands died now have to face an agonizingly slow death.

SIGMUND FREUD (1856–1939)

from *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (in Archive only)
from *Contributions to a Discussion on Suicide* (in Archive only)
from *Mourning and Melancholia* (in Archive only)
from *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*
from *The Economic Problem of Masochism*

Freud was born in Freiberg in Mähren, in what is now Czechoslovakia. His intellectual gifts were apparent early on, and at 17, he entered the University of Vienna to study medicine. He published his first academic paper at 20 on neurology. In 1885, while studying with the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris, Freud began to perceive that mental illness might have entirely psychological origins apart from organic causes. These studies gave way to an interest in psychology, and in 1895, he co-published Studies in Hysteria *with the physician Josef Breuer; hysteria, he believed, was the result of repressed desires. This work also introduced Freud's notion of free association, a technique through which the psychoanalyst may uncover the hidden workings of the unconscious by allowing the patient to freely associate "random" thoughts in his or her mind. Perhaps Freud's best known work,* The Interpretation of Dreams *(1899), analyzed the complexly symbolic and frequently sexually oriented operations underlying the process of dreaming. A controversial study of 1905,* Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, *outlined his theories of infantile sexuality and the stages of human psychological and sexual development.*

After initial ostracism by the Viennese medical community, the first International Psychoanalytical Congress of 1908 marked the beginning and recognition of the analytical movement in psychology. Freud's many theories—including the Oedipus complex, the tripartite structure of the mind (ego, id, superego), as well as his speculations on the psychoanalytical aspects of myth, religion, and culture—underwent revision throughout his long life. His legacy includes the concepts of repression, defense mechanisms, "Freudian slips," projection, and many others. His deterministic, anti-rational, and, some would say, pessimistic views of the importance of unconscious drives and instincts in human conduct radically altered the way people viewed the world and themselves. Despite a history of criticism and attempts to declare him obsolete, Freudian and neo-Freudian

psychoanalytic theory is still in use by practitioners worldwide, and it continues to influence such diverse fields as history, art, and sociology.

The selections presented here outline Freud's views on suicide. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life *(1901), Freud argues for an unconscious drive for suicide and illustrates the human tendency to view self-inflicted injuries as unintentional. Indeed, according to Freudian death-instinct theory, suicide is the prototypal death.* Contributions to a Discussion on Suicide *(1910) contains Freud's speculations on the causes of suicide in secondary schools. In* Mourning and Melancholia *(1917) and* The Economic Problem of Masochism *(1924), Freud discusses how the dynamics among internal psychological forces can lead to self-destruction or punishment. By using a case study in* The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman *(1920), Freud argues that suicide stems from infantile fantasies. He does not, however, discuss suicide in the circumstances of painful and ultimately terminal illness, as in his own case.*

In 1923, Freud was diagnosed with cancer of the palate. The growth was removed but recurred, and during the 16 years between diagnosis and death, he underwent over 30 operations, as well as repeated fittings, cleanings, and refittings of a prosthesis for his jaw. He retrained himself to speak, but his voice never recovered its clarity. When the Nazis came to power, he considered exile, but resisted it until the occupation of Vienna in spring l938. During that spring, over 500 Austrian Jews committed suicide, but Freud rejected the idea even when it was raised by his daughter Anna. In June 1938, he fled to London, where he had further surgery, but by August, the pain was severe and the smell from his ulcerated cancer so foul, it was reported, that his pet dog would cringe from him. Freud had long had an agreement with his physician Max Schur, also in exile in London, that Schur would help him end his life when the cancer had progressed too far, and on September 21, 1939, Schur injected Freud with morphine, followed by further injections the following day; Freud died on September 23.

Sources

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"Contributions to a Discussion on Suicide," Vol. 11, 1957, pp. 231–32; "Mourning and Melancholia," Vol. 14, 1957, pp. 250–52; "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," Vol. 18, 1955, pp. 160–163; "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Vol. 19, 1961, pp. 168–70, all from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74).

from THE PSYCHOGENESIS OF A CASE OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN A WOMAN

We are led into quite another realm of explanation by the analysis of the attempt at suicide, which I must regard as seriously intended, and which, incidentally, considerably improved her position both with her parents and with the lady she loved. She went for a walk with her one day in a part of the town and at an hour at which she was not unlikely to meet her

father on his way from his office. So it turned out. Her father passed them in the street and cast a furious look at her and her companion, about whom he had by that time come to know. A few moments later she flung herself into the railway cutting. The explanation she gave of the immediate reasons determining her decision sounded quite plausible. She had confessed to the lady that the man who had given them such an irate glance was her father, and that he had absolutely forbidden their friendship. The lady became incensed at this and ordered the girl to leave her then and there, and never again to wait for her or to address her—the affair must now come to an end. In her despair at having thus lost her loved one for ever, she wanted to put an end to herself. The analysis, however, was able to disclose another and deeper interpretation behind the one she gave, which was confirmed by the evidence of her own dreams. The attempted suicide was, as might have been expected, determined by two other motives besides the one she gave: it was the fulfilment of a punishment (self-punishment), and the fulfilment of a wish. As the latter it meant the attainment of the very wish which, when frustrated, had driven her into homosexuality—namely, the wish to have a child by her father, for now she 'fell' through her father's fault. The fact that at that moment the lady had spoken in just the same terms as her father, and had uttered the same prohibition, forms the connecting link between this deep interpretation and the superficial one of which the girl herself was conscious. From the point of view of self-punishment the girl's action shows us that she had developed in her unconscious strong death-wishes against one or other of her parents—perhaps against her father, out of revenge for impeding her love, but more probably against her mother too, when she was pregnant with the little brother. For analysis has explained the enigma of suicide in the following way: probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else. Nor need the regular discovery of these unconscious death-wishes in those who have attempted suicide surprise us (any more than it ought to make us think that it confirms our deductions), since the unconscious of all human beings is full enough of such death-wishes, even against those they love. Since the girl identified herself with her mother, who should have died at the birth of the child denied to herself, this punishment-fulfilment itself was once again a wish-fulfilment. Finally, the discovery that several quite different motives, all of great strength, must have co-operated to make such a deed possible is only in accordance with what we should expect.

from THE ECONOMIC PROBLEM OF MASOCHISM

After these preliminaries we can return to our consideration of moral masochism. We have said that, by their behaviour during treatment and in life, the individuals in question give an impression of being morally inhibited to an excessive degree, of being under the domination of an especially sensitive conscience, although they are not conscious of any of this ultra-morality. On closer inspection, we can see the difference there is between an unconscious extension of

morality of this kind and moral masochism. In the former, the accent falls on the heightened sadism of the super-ego to which the ego submits; in the latter, it falls on the ego's own masochism which seeks punishment, whether from the super-ego or from the parental powers outside. We may be forgiven for having confused the two to begin with; for in both cases it is a question of a relationship between the ego and the super-ego (or powers that are equivalent to it), and in both cases what is involved is a need which is satisfied by punishment and suffering. It can hardly be an insignificant detail, then, that the sadism of the super-ego becomes for the most part glaringly conscious, whereas the masochistic trend of the ego remains as a rule concealed from the subject and has to be inferred from his behaviour.

The fact that moral masochism is unconscious leads us to an obvious clue. We were able to translate the expression 'unconscious sense of guilt' as meaning a need for punishment at the hands of a parental power. We now know that the wish, which so frequently appears in phantasies, to be beaten by the father stands very close to the other wish, to have a passive (feminine) sexual relation to him and is only a regressive distortion of it. If we insert this explanation into the content of moral masochism, its hidden meaning becomes clear to us. Conscience and morality have arisen through the overcoming, the desexualization, of the Oedipus complex; but through moral masochism morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus complex is revived and the way is opened for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex. This is to the advantage neither of morality nor of the person concerned. An individual may, it is true, have preserved the whole or some measure of ethical sense alongside of his masochism; but, alternatively, a large part of his conscience may have vanished into his masochism. Again, masochism creates a temptation to perform 'sinful' actions, which may then be expiated by the reproaches of the sadistic conscience (as is exemplified in so many Russian character-types) or by chastisement from the great parental power of Destiny. In order to provoke punishment from this last representative of the parents, the masochist must do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world and must, perhaps, destroy his own real existence.

The turning back of sadism against the self regularly occurs where a *cultural suppression of the instincts* holds back a large part of the subject's destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life. We may suppose that this portion of the destructive instinct which has retreated appears in the ego as an intensification of masochism. The phenomena of conscience, however, lead us to infer that the destructiveness which returns from the external world is also taken up by the super-ego, without any such transformation, and increases its sadism against the ego. The sadism of the super-ego and the masochism of the ego supplement each other and unite to produce the same effects. It is only in this way, I think, that we can understand how the suppression of an instinct can—frequently or quite generally—result in a sense of guilt and how a person's conscience becomes more severe and more sensitive the more he refrains from aggression against others. One might expect that if a man knows that he is in the habit of avoiding the commission of acts of aggression that are undesirable from a cultural standpoint he will for that reason have a good conscience and will watch over his ego less suspiciously. The situation is usually presented as though ethical requirements were the primary thing and the renunciation of instinct followed from them. This leaves the origin of the ethical sense unexplained. Actually, it seems to be the other way about. The first instinctual renunciation is enforced by external powers, and it is only this which creates the ethical sense, which expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of instinct.

Thus moral masochism becomes a classical piece of evidence for the existence of fusion of instinct. Its danger lies in the fact that it originates from the death instinct and corresponds to the part of that instinct which has escaped being turned outwards as an instinct of destruction. But since, on the other hand, it has the significance of an erotic component, even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

from *Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Émile Durkheim is widely regarded as the founder of the French school of sociology. He was born in Épinal, Lorraine, to a Jewish family who expected him to become a rabbi like his father. Instead, his success in secular education led him in 1879 to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, then considered the best teachers' college in France, though he grew disenchanted with the school's emphasis on superficial philosophical generalizations, and turned to sociology with the aim of establishing a rigorous, objective science of society. He became the first French professor of sociology at Bordeaux and taught social philosophy until 1902; in that year, he was appointed a professor of education and sociology at the Sorbonne, where he remained the rest of his life. Durkheim died a year after his only son was killed in World War I. He left behind a committed following of researchers, including Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In his writings, Durkheim was concerned with religion and education as key instruments in achieving moral and societal reform. In the Rules of Sociological Method *(1895), he defined a scientific, rigorous method of study for sociology. He argued for the existence of a societal "collective consciousness" that could not be reduced to individual or biological psychology; social environment is therefore a real entity that can be studied on its own merits.*

In 1898, Durkheim founded the Année sociologique*, which was intended to bring together social science scholars and encourage the field's specialization. It was the place of the social sciences and educational reform to help society avoid "anomie," or, as he later called it, social disconnectedness—the absence, conflict, or weakness of norms for conduct. In* The Elementary Forms of Religious Life *(1912), Durkheim postulated religion's role as the ultimate representation of communal consciousness; religion is the acknowledged binding force in collective participation that exemplifies the force of social bonds. Durkheim's systematic and rigorous ideas, resisted during his own life, became the basis for modern empirical research in sociology.*

In Suicide *(1897), the first book-length treatment of this topic, Durkheim analyzes statistical data on suicides among Catholics and Protestants. Durkheim argued that the forces of social integration and regulation play an essential and complex role in the individual decision to end one's life; these social forces vary with the type of social organization characteristic of a given group. Durkheim divides these forces and the types of suicide they produce into three, or more accurately, four categories. The*

first type of suicide is "altruistic"; here, the individual is highly integrated into society and rigorously governed by social custom: suicides occur because they are required by the society in certain circumstances, as in the Hindu custom of sati *and Japanese suicides of honor. The second type of suicide is "egoistic": individuals are loosely integrated into the society and do not respond to social regulations and expectations. The third type is "anomic," which is the case when society itself fails to provide adequate regulation of its members. Durkheim believed that this third type is characteristic of modern industrial society. A fourth type, "fatalistic suicide," only briefly discussed by Durkheim in a footnote at the end of Chapter 5, is the opposite of the anomic type, occurring when a person is socially oppressed and sees no other escape from an environment of excessive control (the suicides of slaves, of "very young husbands," and of "the married woman who is childless"), but Durkheim finds this type not of "contemporary importance" and does not discuss it further.*

In the first part of these selections from Suicide, *beginning with "The General Nature of Suicide as a Social Phenomenon," Durkheim explores the interaction of social forces in the historical, legal, and sociological contexts of suicide.*

In the second section, beginning with Book 3, Chapter 2, Durkheim surveys the history of prohibitions against suicide in Greek, Roman, and Christian societies. He concludes that the reprobation of suicide has become more universal over time. Concerning the time during the decline of the city-states when suicide was temporarily tolerated, Durkheim writes that such societies "cannot be referred to as an example for imitation; for [their toleration of suicide] is clearly interrelated with the serious disturbances which then affected those societies. It is the symptom of a morbid condition." Durkheim argues that suicide must be considered immoral because it violates the ideal of collective humanity "as conceived by each people at each moment in history." No man or society, having accepted this ideal once, now has the right to depart from it; "like every ideal, it can be conceived of only as superior to and dominating reality. This ideal even dominates societies, being the aim on which all social activity depends. This is why it is no longer the right of these societies to dispose of this ideal freely . . . they have subjected themselves to the jurisdiction of this ideal and no longer have the right to ignore it; still less to authorize men themselves to do so." In order for the "religion of humanity" to maintain its (rightful) authority, suicide as a denial of the individual's submission to the interests of all human kind "must be classed among immoral acts."

The third part of this selection, from Book 3, Chapter 3, concerns the changes in modern society that Durkheim believes are necessary to prevent further increases in egoistic and anomic suicides, which are each conditioned by excess individuation. Durkheim argues that in modern society, the formerly central institutions of state, religion, and family no longer provide the constant regulation and power to encourage thorough collective integration what they once did; having lost their socially organizing power, they cannot be reinvested with the compelling collective consciousnesses they once represented. According to Durkheim, "since occupational life is almost the whole of life," corporations are the best candidates for a type of institution that could persuasively demand the devotion of individuals to a collective consciousness. He coins the term "occupational decentralization" to refer to vast simultaneous conglomeration and internal specialization of corporate activity. "Occupational group" would become the new basis of political organization, and each corporation a "definite institution, a collective personality, with its customs and traditions, its rights and duties, its unity." The only type of anomie that Durkheim believes would be unaffected by these societal changes is "conjugal anomy." He argues that divorce should be made more difficult and that, in order to make the constraints of matrimony more agreeable to women, the opportunities for women in society would need to change so that women might come to be as psychologically integrated in collective society as men are.

Source

Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Introduction: The Social Element Of Suicide; Book 2, Chapter 3; Book 3, Chapter 1, Part IV, trs. John Spaulding and George Simpson, ed. George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 297–300, 326–342, 370–392.

from SUICIDE

The Social Element of Suicide

The individual conditions on which suicide might, *a priori*, be supposed to depend, are of two sorts.

There is first the external situation of agent. Sometimes men who kill themselves have had family sorrow or disappointments to their pride, sometimes they have had to suffer poverty or sickness, at others they have had some moral fault with which to reproach themselves, etc. But we have seen that these individual peculiarities could not explain the social suicide-rate; for the latter varies in considerable proportions, whereas the different combinations of circumstances which constitute the immediate antecedents of individual cases of suicide retain approximately the same relative frequency. They are therefore not the determining causes of the act which they precede. Their occasionally important role in the premeditation of suicide is no proof of being a causal one. Human deliberations, in fact, so far as reflective consciousness affects them are often only purely formal, with no object but confirmation of a resolve previously formed for reasons unknown to consciousness.

Besides, the circumstances are almost infinite in number which are supposed to cause suicide because they rather frequently accompany it. One man kills himself in the midst of affluence, another in the lap of poverty; one was unhappy in his home, and another had just ended by divorce a marriage which was making him unhappy. In one case a soldier ends his life after having been punished for an offense he did not commit; in another, a criminal whose crime has remained unpunished kills himself. The most varied and even the most contradictory events of life may equally serve as pretexts for suicide. This suggests that none of them is the specific cause. Could we perhaps at least ascribe causality to those qualities known to be common to all? But are there any such? At best one might say that they usually consist of disappointments, of sorrows, without any possibility of deciding how intense the grief must be to have such tragic significance. Of no disappointment in life, no matter how significant, can we say in advance that it could not possibly make existence intolerable; and, on the other hand, there is none which must necessarily have this effect. We see some men resist horrible misfortune, while others kill themselves after slight troubles. Moreover, we have shown that those who suffer most are not those who kill themselves most. Rather it is too great comfort which turns a man against himself. Life is most readily renounced at the time and among the classes where it is least harsh. At least, if it really sometimes occurs that the victim's personal situation is the effective cause of his resolve, such cases are very rare indeed and accordingly cannot explain the social suicide-rate.

Accordingly, even those who have ascribed most influence to individual conditions have sought these conditions less in such external incidents than in the intrinsic nature of the person, that is, his biological constitution and the physical concomitants on which it depends. Thus,

suicide has been represented as the product of a certain temperament, an episode of neurasthenia, subject to the effects of the same factors as neurasthenia. Yet we have found no immediate and regular relationship between neurasthenia and the social suicide-rate. The two facts even vary at times in inverse proportion to one another, one being at its minimum just when and where the other is at its height. We have not found, either, any definite relation between the variations of suicide and the conditions of physical environment supposed to have most effect on the nervous system, such as race, climate, temperature. Obviously, though the neuropath may show some inclination to suicide under certain conditions, he is not necessarily destined to kill himself; and the influence of cosmic factors is not enough to determine in just this sense the very general tendencies of his nature.

Wholly different are the results we obtained when we forgot the individual and sought the causes of the suicidal aptitude of each society in the nature of the societies themselves. The relations of suicide to certain states of social environment are as direct and constant as its relations to facts of a biological and physical character were seen to be uncertain and ambiguous. Here at last we are face to face with real laws, allowing us to attempt a methodical classification of types of suicide. The sociological causes thus determined by us have even explained these various concurrences often attributed to the influence of material causes, and in which a proof of this influence has been sought. If women kill themselves much less often than men, it is because they are much less involved than men in collective existence; thus they feel its influence—good or evil—less strongly. So it is with old persons and children, though for other reasons. Finally, if suicide increases from January to June but then decreases, it is because social activity shows similar seasonal fluctuations. It is therefore natural that the different effects of social activity should be subject to an identical rhythm, and consequently be more pronounced during the former of these two periods. Suicide is one of them.

The conclusion from all these facts is that the social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically. At any given moment the moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths. There is, therefore, for each people a collective force of a definite amount of energy, impelling men to self-destruction. The victim's acts which at first seem to express only his personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally.

This answers the question posed at the beginning of this work. It is not mere metaphor to say of each human society that it has a greater or lesser aptitude for suicide; the expression is based on the nature of things. Each social group really has a collective inclination for the act, quite its own, and the source of all individual inclination, rather than their result. It is made up of the currents of egoism, altruism or anomy running through the society under consideration with the tendencies to languorous melancholy, active renunciation or exasperated weariness derivative from these currents. These tendencies of the whole social body, by affecting individuals, cause them to commit suicide. The private experiences usually thought to be the proximate causes of suicide have only the influences borrowed from the victim's moral predisposition, itself an echo of the moral state of society. To explain his detachment from life the individual accuses his most immediately surrounding circumstances; life is sad to him because he is sad. Of course his sadness comes to him from without in one sense, however not from one or another incident of his career but rather from the group to which he belongs. This is why there is nothing which cannot serve as an occasion for suicide. It all depends on the intensity with which suicidogenetic causes have affected the individual.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN (1860–1935)

from *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (expanded in Archive)

Suicide Note, August 17, 1935 (in Archive only)

from *The Right to Die* (expanded in Archive)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman—writer, philosopher, feminist, and social critic—contributed significantly to 20th-century political and feminist theory. Born in 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, she lived much of her childhood in poverty after her father left the family when she was seven years old. She taught herself to read, studied music, and was largely self-educated in the fields of history, sociology, biology, and evolution. She attended public school sporadically until age 15 and later studied at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Gilman became active in women's issues at a young age. She founded a women's gym in Providence when she was 21 at a time when overexertion was thought to cause hysteria in women. She later gained recognition as a lecturer and writer, focusing her talents on the Nationalist Movement, a type of socialism based on Edward Bellamy's thought and portrayed in his novel Looking Backward *(1888). Gilman's philosophy, activism, and writings showed enormous breadth, and included works on political and social reform, support for the Labor Movement and women's suffrage, poetry, essays, and studies on gender issues in economics, anthropology, and history. She is also known for her famous work of short fiction* The Yellow Wallpaper *(1892), a semi-autobiographical account of her nervous breakdown following the birth of her daughter, which, like Virginia Woolf's [q.v.]* Mrs. Dalloway *(1925), includes a searing critique of the manner in which the medical community treated women's mental health near the turn of the century.*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1932. Before this diagnosis, Gilman had written about euthanasia and right-to-die issues. In one passage from her posthumously published autobiography The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman *(1935), she remarks after visiting her ill father in a sanitarium that a future civilized society would not "maintain such a horror." In 1935, after living three years with a cancer she had been told would kill her within a year and a half, Gilman ended her life by inhaling chloroform. She left a letter, conventionally called a suicide note, which stressed her view of the primacy of human relationships and social responsibility ("Human life consists in mutual service") and ended in the famous line: "I have preferred chloroform to cancer."*

At the time of her death, she left with her agent the manuscript of an article entitled "The Right to Die," a defense not only of suicide but also of voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary euthanasia, requesting that it be published after her death. It was intended as a piece for discussion at the height of the euthanasia movement in the United States, before the horrors of the Nazi holocaust became known.

Sources

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co.), 1935, pp. 215, 333–335, 331; "The Right to Die," *The Forum and Century* Vol. XCIV, no. 5 (Nov. 1935), pp. 297–300.

from THE LIVING OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

. . . In January, 1932, I discovered that I had cancer of the breast. My only distress was for Houghton. I had not the least objection to dying. But I did not propose to die of this, so I promptly bought sufficient chloroform as a substitute. Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, pain, misfortune or "broken heart" is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one.

Public opinion is changing on this subject. The time is approaching when we shall consider it abhorrent to our civilization to allow a human being to die in prolonged agony which we should mercifully end in any other creature. Believing this open choice to be of social service in promoting wiser views on this question, I have preferred chloroform to cancer.

Going to my doctor for definite assurance, he solemnly agreed with my diagnosis and thought the case inoperable.

"Well," said I cheerfully, "how long does it take?" He estimated a year and a half. "How long shall I be able to type?" I asked. "I must finish my *Ethics*." He thought I might be quite comfortable for six months. It is now three and a half years and this obliging malady has given me no pain yet.

Then came what was pain—telling Houghton. He wanted an expert opinion, and we got it. No mistake. Then, since I utterly refused a late operation, he urged me to try X-ray treatment, which I did with good effects. He suffered a thousand times more than I did—but not for long. On the fourth of May, 1934, he suddenly died, from cerebral hemorrhage.

Whatever I felt of loss and pain was outweighed by gratitude for an instant, painless death for him, and that he did not have to see me wither and die—and he be left alone. . . .

. . . People are heavenly good to me. Dear friends write to me, with outrageous praises. I am most unconcernedly willing to die when I get ready. I have no faintest belief in personal immortality—no interest in nor desire for it.

My life is in Humanity—and that goes on. My contentment is in God—and That goes on. The Social Consciousness, fully accepted, automatically eliminates both selfishness and pride. The one predominant duty is to find one's work and do it, and I have striven mightily at that.

The religion, the philosophy, set up so early, have seen me through.

from THE RIGHT TO DIE

Should an incurable invalid, suffering constant pain and begging for a quicker, easier death, be granted that mercy?

Should a hopeless idiot, lunatic, or helpless paretic be laboriously kept alive?

Should certain grades of criminals be painlessly removed—or cruelly condemned to the cumulative evil of imprisonment?

Is suicide sometimes quite justifiable?

We have changed our minds more than once on these matters and are in process of changing them again. On the above questions, asked a hundred or even fifty years ago, there would have been scant discussion. Humans were mainly agreed that certain criminals deserved death, that suicide was a sin, and that agonized invalids and healthy idiots were to be cherished carefully.

The influence of the Christian religion has done much to establish a sort of dogma of the "sanctity of human life," but the ancient religions of India went further, holding all life sacred, to such an extent that the pious Jain sweeps the path before him lest he step on a worm.

What is the "sanctity of human life"? Why is it sacred? How is it sacred? When is it sacred?

Is it sacred where we lavishly reproduce it, without thought or purpose? While it is going on? Or only when it is about to end?

Our mental attics are full of old ideas and emotions, which we preserve sentimentally but never examine. The advance of the world's thought is promoted by those whose vigorous minds seize upon inert doctrines and passive convictions and shake them into life or into tatters. This theory that suicide is a sin is being so shaken today.

Why has not a man the right to take his own life? Shaw, the inveterate shaker of old ideas, says that his own life is the only one a man has a right to take.

Against this apparently natural right stand two assumptions, one that it is cowardly, the other that it is a sin. The brave man is supposed to endure long, hopeless agony to the bitter end, as an exhibition of courage; the moral man similarly to bear incurable suffering, because to shorten his torment would be wrong.

How much more reasonable is the spirit of the sturdy old country doctor who was found dead in his bed, with a revolver by his side and the brief note, "There's no damn cancer going to get ahead of me!"

Why it should please God to have a harmless victim suffer prolonged agony was never made clear; but those who so thought also assumed that whatever happened was God's will, that He was afflicting us for some wise purpose of His own and did not like to be thwarted, balked in his plan of punishment so to speak. Astonishing calumnies have been believed of God.

There is a pleasant tale of an ingenious person, captive of savages and obliged to watch the horrors of his comrades' dreadful deaths. When his turn came, he told the credulous natives that he knew of an herb which, when rubbed upon the skin, rendered it impervious to any weapon and which he would show them if they would spare him.

So they accompanied him here and there in the forest, till he picked a certain rare plant, which he rubbed well on the side of his neck. Then he laid his head on a log and told them to strike as hard as they liked. Down came the ax, and off went a grinning ghost, enjoying their discomfiture—at least it is pleasant to think so. At any rate he was not tortured. But he had lied, to be sure, and practically committed suicide. Was it sin?

Suicide was a gentleman's exit in ancient Rome, as it is yet in the Orient. It must have been too popular in the misery of the Dark Ages, for a discerning church soon decided that it was extremely wrong. It was a difficult offense to penalize, the offender having escaped, so they punished the corpse, burying it with a stake through the body, at a crossroads, that, instead of enjoying seclusion and consecrated ground, it might be trampled over by all who passed.

II

A very special damnation having been provided for such rebellious souls, suicide fell into disrepute. It is now becoming popular again, not merely as a justifiable escape from an unbearable position but as a hopeful experiment for discouraged youth. . . . As with most moral questions, the confusion lies in our outdated sense of individuality, our failure to recognize social responsibility. Youth is, of course, naturally egotistical, and in home, school, church, and ordinary contact little is done to develop social consciousness.

That an individual's life, growth, and happiness are dependent on interrelation with other people and that each of us owes to others the best service of a lifetime is not accepted by those who back out of life because it hurts. Such premature and ill-based suicide is timid, feeble, foolish, and, in respect to social responsibility, dishonorable. It is desertion, not in the face of the enemy but before imagined enemies.

On the other hand, military law forbids the attempt to hold an indefensible position. There are times when surrender is quite justifiable. If men or women are beyond usefulness, feel that they are of no service or comfort to any one but a heavy burden and expense, and, above all, if they suffer hopelessly, they have a right to leave. . . .

MOHANDAS K. GANDHI (1869–1948)

from *Indian Home Rule*

from *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth*

from *Non-Violence in Peace and War*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (often called "Mahatma," or "great soul"), the Indian nationalist and advocate of non-violence, was born in Porbandar to the local chief minister and a mother who was an active disciple of Vaishnavism, the worship of the Hindu god Vishnu. Gandhi's religious upbringing emphasized principles of ahimsa *(non-injury to living beings), fasting, self-purification, and nonviolence; these themes would figure prominently in his political philosophy. His academic performance in Indian schools was mediocre; however, after a rebellious adolescence, Gandhi committed himself to a program of passionate self-improvement. In 1888, he sailed to England to study law at the Inner Temple, but found himself more involved in adjusting to Western culture. His vegetarianism, at first a source of embarrassment, became an opportunity to practice his social influence: he joined the London Vegetarian Society, where he was introduced to the Bible and the Bhagavad-Gita.*

In 1891, he returned to India to discover that, because he found himself unable to speak in the courtroom and thus was left merely to prepare legal documents, law was not a lucrative career for

him in India. Subsequently, in 1893, he took a job for an Indian firm in South Africa; the prejudices against Indians he encountered there persuaded him to remain to help fight discrimination. Almost overnight he was transformed into a skilled politician. He established spiritual communities (ashrams)*, the Natal Indian Congress, and a weekly newspaper, the* Indian Opinion. *In 1906, he staged his first nonviolent resistance campaign based on his technique of* satyagraha *("the Force which is born of Truth and Love, or nonviolence"), which he derived from the works of Thoreau, Tolstoy, the Hindu scriptures, and the New Testament. Gandhi and his followers in South Africa were often threatened and imprisoned.*

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India, where he began to campaign and fast for Indians of the lowest castes and for "untouchables," whom he renamed Harijan, *"children of God." Upon the passing of the Rowlatt Act in 1919, an infringement on Indian civil liberties, he planned an all-India* satyagraha *campaign, but the event backfired when some of the protesters resorted to violence. Another campaign in 1920 boycotted the British cloth industry; he was subsequently arrested for sedition in 1922 and spent two years in prison. (During his lifetime, he would spend a total of 2,338 days in jail.) Upon his release, he was elected president of the Indian National Congress. He led several social movements, his "constructive program," which included women's rights, education, industry, personal hygiene, and Hindu-Muslim unity. However, the issue of whether there should be a separate electorate for Dalits, an alternative term for "untouchables," divided him from the activist Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar regarded as a hero of the casteless. In 1933, Gandhi fasted for 21 days over issues concerning untouchables. In 1942, he led a* satyagraha *to demand the withdrawal of British forces from India; the British reacted sharply and imprisoned the leadership of the Congress. On August 15, 1947, India and Pakistan were declared independent, but Gandhi was deeply disappointed by this lack of unity at the moment of freedom. Renewed riots between Hindus and Muslims led Gandhi to a final fast. In 1948, Gandhi was assassinated in Delhi by a Hindu fanatic while traveling to his evening prayer meeting.*

Gandhi's collected works—autobiography, letters, editorials, and speeches—fill 100 volumes. In his autobiography The Story of My Experiments with Truth *(1927), Gandhi recounts his consideration of suicide during his period of youthful rebellion. His writings on* satyagraha *often refer to conditions under which it is permissible to lay down one's own life for a noble cause. In the pamphlet "Indian Home Rule" (1909), he uses the dialogue of a hypothetical editor and reader to explain the attitudes of a "passive resister" toward death; in rejecting the ancient tradition of self-immolation that was practiced by Buddhist monks in Vietnam (q.v., Thich Nhat Hanh) in* Harijan *(1940), he insists that that was mere passive resistance, not the active, engaged* satyagraha *that he supported.* Non-Violence in Peace and War *(1945) illuminates his belief in the importance of learning the "art of dying."*

Sources

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from INDIAN HOME RULE

EDITOR: Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force. For instance, the Government of the day has passed a law which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If by using violence I force the Government to repeal the law, I an employing what may be termed body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self.

Everybody admits that sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others. Moreover, if this kind of force is used in a cause that is unjust, only the person using it suffers. He does not make others suffer for his mistakes. Men have before now done many things which were subsequently found to have been wrong. No man can claim that he is absolutely in the right or that a particular thing is wrong because he thinks so, but it is wrong for him so long as that is his deliberate judgment. It is therefore meet that he should not do that which he knows to be wrong, and suffer the consequence whatever it may be. This is the key to the use of soul-force. . .

READER: From what you say I deduce that passive resistance is a splendid weapon of the weak, but that when they are strong they may take up arms.

EDITOR: This is a gross ignorance. Passive resistance, that is, soul-force, is matchless. It is superior to the force of arms. How, then, can it be considered only a weapon of the weak? Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a passive resister. Do you believe that a coward can ever disobey a law that he dislikes? Extremists are considered to be advocates of brute force. Why do they, then, talk about obeying laws? I do not blame them. They can say nothing else. When they succeed in driving out the English and they themselves become governors, they will want you and me to obey their laws. And that is a fitting thing for their constitution. But a passive resister will say he will not obey a law that is against his conscience, even though he may be blown to pieces at the mouth of a cannon.

What do you think? Wherein is courage required—in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon, or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior—he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend, or he who controls the death of others? Believe me that a man devoid of courage and manhood can never be a passive resister.

This, however, I will admit: that even a man weak in body is capable of offering this resistance. One man can offer it just as well as millions. Both men and women can indulge in it. It does not require the training of an army; it needs no jiu-jitsu. Control over the mind is alone necessary, and when that is attained, man is free like the king of the forest and his very glance withers the enemy.

Passive resistance is an all-sided sword, it can be used anyhow; it blesses him who uses it and him against whom if is used. Without drawing a drop of blood it produces far-reaching results. It never rusts and cannot be stolen. Competition between passive resisters does not exhaust. The sword of passive resistance does not require a scabbard. It is strange indeed that you should consider such a weapon to be a weapon merely of the weak. . . .

READER: From what you say, then, it would appear that it is not a small thing to become a passive resister, and, if that is so, I should like you to explain how a man may become one.

EDITOR: To become a passive resister is easy enough but it is also equally difficult. I have known a lad of fourteen years become a passive resister; I have known also sick people do

likewise; and I have also known physically strong and otherwise happy people unable to take up passive resistance. After a great deal of experience it seems to me that those who want to become passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness.

Chastity is one of the greatest disciplines without which the mind cannot attain requisite firmness. A man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly. He whose mind is given over to animal passions is not capable of any great effort. . . .

Just as there is necessity for chastity, so is there for poverty. Pecuniary ambition and passive resistance cannot go well together. Those who have money are not expected to throw it away, but they are expected to be indifferent about it. They must be prepared to lose every penny rather than give up passive resistance.

Passive resistance has been described in the course of our discussion as truth-force. Truth, therefore, has necessarily to be followed and that at any cost. In this connection, academic questions such as whether a man may not lie in order to save a life, etc., arise, but these questions occur only to those who wish to justify lying. Those who want to follow truth every time are not placed in such a quandary; and if they are, they are still saved from a false position.

Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness. Those alone can follow the path of passive resistance who are free from fear, whether as to their possessions, false honor, their relatives, the government, bodily injuries or death.

from AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH

Stealing and Atonement

I have still to relate some of my failings during this meat-eating period and also previous to it, which date from before my marriage or soon after.

A relative and I became fond of smoking. Not that we saw any good in smoking, or were enamoured of the smell of a cigarette. We simply imagined a sort of pleasure in emitting clouds of smoke from our mouths. My uncle had the habit, and when we saw him smoking, we thought we should copy his example. But we had no money. So we began pilfering stumps of cigarettes thrown away by my uncle.

The stumps, however, were not always available, and could not emit much smoke either. So we began to steal coppers from the servant's pocket money in order to purchase Indian cigarettes. But the question was where to keep them. We could not of course smoke in the presence of elders. We managed somehow for a few weeks on these stolen coppers. In the meantime we heard that the stalks of a certain plant were porous and could be smoked like cigarettes. We got them and began this kind of smoking.

But we were far from being satisfied with such things as these. Our want of independence began to smart. It was unbearable that we should be unable to do anything without the elders' permission. At last, in sheer disgust, we decided to commit suicide!

But how were we to do it? From where were we to get the poison? We heard that *Dhatura* seeds were an effective poison. Off we went to the jungle in search of these seeds, and got them. Evening was thought to be the auspicious hour. We went to *Kedarji Mandir*, put ghee in the temple-lamp, had the *darshan* and then looked for a lonely corner. But our courage failed us. Supposing we were not instantly killed? And what was the good of killing ourselves? Why not rather put up with the lack of independence? But we swallowed two or three seeds nevertheless. We dared not take more. Both of us fought shy of death, and decided to go to *Ramji Mandir* to compose ourselves, and to dismiss the thought of suicide.

I realized that it was not as easy to commit suicide as to contemplate it. And since then, whenever I have heard of someone threatening to commit suicide, it has had little or no effect on me.

The thought of suicide ultimately resulted in both of us bidding good-bye to the habit of smoking stumps of cigarettes and of stealing the servant's coppers for the purpose of smoking.

from NON-VIOLENCE IN PEACE AND WAR

[In non-violence] the bravery consists in dying, not in killing.

Those who die unresistingly are likely to still the fury of violence by their wholly innocent sacrifice.

He who meets death without striking a blow fulfills his duty cent per cent. The result is in God's hands.

A *satyagrahi* is dead to his body even before his enemy attempts to kill him, i.e., he is free from attachment to his body and only lives in the victory of his soul. Therefore when he is already thus dead, why should he yearn to kill anyone? To die in the act of killing is in essence to die defeated.

Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence.

The votary of non-violence has to cultivate his capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear. . . . He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice *ahimsa* to perfection. The votary of *ahimsa* has only one fear, that is of God. He who seeks refuge in God ought to have a glimpse of the *Atman* [the transcendent self] that transcends the body; and the moment one has glimpsed the imperishable *Atman* one sheds the love of the perishable body. . . . Violence is needed for the protection of things external; non-violence is needed for the protection of the *Atman*, for the protection of one's honor.

There is a natural prejudice against fasting as part of a political struggle. . . . It is considered a vulgar interpolation in politics by the ordinary politician, though it has always been resorted to by prisoners. . . . My own fasts have always been strictly according to the laws of *satyagraha*. . . . I have been driven to the conclusion that fasting unto death is an integral part of the *satyagraha* program, and it is the greatest and most effective weapon in its armory under giver circumstances. Not everyone is qualified for undertaking it without a proper course of training.

A *satyagrahi* must always be ready to die with a smile on his face, without retaliation and without rancor in his heart. Some people have come to have a wrong notion that *satyagraha* means only jail-going, perhaps facing blows, and nothing more. Such *satyagraha* cannot bring independence. To win independence you have to learn the art of dying without killing.

A *satyagrahi* should fast only as a last resort when all other avenues of redress have been explored and have failed.

To lay down one's life for what one considers to be right is the very core of *satyagraha*.

A *satyagrahi* may never run away from danger, irrespective of whether he is alone or in the company of many. He will have fully performed his duty if he dies fighting.

You are no *satyagrahis* if you remain silent or passive spectators while your enemy is being done to death. You must protect him even at the cost of your own life.

The art of dying for a *satyagrahi* consists in facing death cheerfully in the performance of one's duty.

Ahimsa is one of the world's great principles which no force on earth can wipe out. Thousands like myself may die in trying to vindicate the ideal, but *ahimsa* will never die. And the gospel of *ahimsa* can be spread only through believers dying for the cause.

Non-violence is the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy. . . . Unless now the world adopts non-violence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind.

Murder can never be avenged by either murder or taking compensation. The only way to avenge murder is to offer oneself as a willing sacrifice, with no desire for retaliation.

A non-violent man or woman will and should die without retaliation, anger or malice, in self-defense or in defending the honor of his women folk. This is the highest form of bravery. If an individual or group of people are unable or unwilling to follow this great law of life, retaliation or resistance unto death is the second best, though a long way off from the first. Cowardice is impotence worse than violence. The coward desires revenge but being afraid to die, he looks to others, maybe to the government of the day, to do the work of defense for him. A coward is less than a man. He does not deserve to be a member of a society of men and women.

[Jesus—] a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.

No man, if he is pure, has anything more precious to give than his life.

ALFRED ADLER (1870–1937)

from *Suicide*

Born near Vienna to a grain merchant, Adler's experiences with rickets and a near fatal case of pneumonia as a child made him interested in a medical career. He received his M.D. from the University of Vienna in 1895 and practiced general medicine until about 1900, when he turned to psychiatry and neurology. As a physician, Adler demonstrated a holistic approach to the patient, taking seriously into

account the contexts of social and human factors. In 1902, he began a close association with Sigmund Freud, which eventually disintegrated because of irreconcilable differences between their theories. Adler rejected Freud's idea that neurosis stemmed from childhood sexual conflicts; instead, for Adler, sexuality filled a figurative position in the attempt to overcome feelings of inadequacy, that universal infantile "inferiority feeling" (or "inferiority complex," as it came to be known), responses to which form the basis of character.

In a Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychical Compensation *(1907) and* The Neurotic Constitution *(1912), Adler repudiated drive psychology and developed a system that came to be known as "Individual Psychology." This theory posits that man's opinion of himself and his surroundings affects all of his psychological operations; man's principal motive is an inherent effort for perfection while his liability is the inferiority complex. For Adler, psychotherapy was a tool to help the patient become more self-determined, socially useful, reasonable, mature, and self-transcendent; this is accomplished by bringing the patient's attention to the failures of his attempts to cope with feelings of inferiority. In 1921, Adler was the first to establish child-guidance clinics in Vienna where he could implement his belief that social values were transmitted in the early education of children, though these clinics were closed by the Austrian government in 1934 because of Adler's Jewish heritage. He lectured and taught widely on social and scientific issues: from 1927 to 1937, he taught in the United States at Columbia University and the Long Island College School of Medicine. He died while on a lecture tour in Scotland.*

Adler's essay "Suicide" (1937) is an example of the increasingly scientific, non-moralizing treatment of suicide that arose with the development of psychiatry and psychology around and after the turn of the century. Adler recognized the situational factors that contribute to suicide, such as cultural beliefs and financial distress; in addition, certain predisposing factors are apparent in certain characteristics of children, such as oversensitivity. Adler also argued that the typical suicide suffers from a limited "social interest"—the importance of social interest was the doctrine Adler had attempted to spread in the 1930s in the face of European nationalist totalitarianism—and has a selfish motive to hurt others by his act; the suicide "hurts others by dreaming himself into injuries or by administering them to himself." This damaging pattern is not seen as morally blameworthy, however, but as the occasion for therapy directed toward expanding the patient's social interests.

Source

Alfred Adler, "Suicide," from *Superiority and Social Interest: A Collection of Later Writings*, eds. Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 248–252.

from SUICIDE

The frequent fact of suicide is surrounded by mystery for the average observer. When he is not personally touched by the suicide of someone near to him, he usually resorts to a superficial explanation which occasionally makes the suicide comprehensible, but usually leaves it incomprehensible. The members of the suicide's intimate and wider circles also usually find the occurrence strange and inexplicable. This does not seem very significant, since, in general, an understanding of human nature and thinking directed toward prophylaxis cannot be taken for granted.

Attempts at explanation often begin with the frequency of suicide among mentally disordered individuals, especially depressed persons, to all of whom suicide appears as a way out of their distress even if by their words they seem to reject it. Thus the approximately normal person is inclined to regard suicide as an entirely pathological phenomenon.

Situational Factors

Even so, there are certain situations from which the normal person regards suicide as the only way out. These are situations which are too distressing and unalterable, such as torment without any prospect for relief, inhumanly cruel attacks, fear of discovery of disgraceful or criminal actions, suffering of incurable and extremely painful diseases, etc. Surprisingly enough, the number of suicides actually committed for such reasons is not great.

Among the so-called causes for suicide, disregarding the cases of the psychologically ill, loss of money and unpayable debts take the first place. This gives us much to think about. Disappointed and unhappy love follow in frequency. Further frequent causes are permanent unemployment, for which the individual may or may not be responsible, and justified or unjustified reproaches.

Another cause is suicide epidemics which, puzzling as this may be, do occasionally happen. Harakiri, although on the decline, still exists among the Japanese. Among women and girls, suicide or attempted suicide takes place relatively frequently at the time of menstruation. Lastly, suicides increase strikingly after the age of fifty. All these facts ought to be explicable through Individual Psychology.

It is not surprising that qualified and unqualified circles often endeavor to work for the reduction of suicides. So far as we can see, such attempts have not succeeded in reducing the suicide rate. This is because individuals who turn to associations for the prevention of suicide would only be those who still regard the future with a certain amount of hope. In our time, the number of suicides is unchanged, possibly even increasing.

The Interpersonal Factor

The frequency of suicide is a serious accusation against the none-too-great social interest of mankind. In view of this, a comprehensive exploration of this puzzling phenomenon is urgently needed.

Among inner, endogenous causes, Individual Psychology considers only the style of life which is established out of heredity and environmental influences by the individual's own creative power with his incomplete, humanly limited insight. In addition, one must determine the external, exogenous cause which reveals the inadequate preparation of the individual in question for the urgent situation before him. When the self-consistent life style thus clashes with the external situation, the extent to which the individual stands the test of living with others in society becomes apparent.

Observations of Individual Psychology have shown that every step of an individual is directed toward the successful solution of a presently imminent task in accordance with the total conception of his self-consistency. What the individual considers success is always a matter of his subjective opinion. Our experience has also shown that all tasks which the individual may

have to meet require, without exception, adequate social interest for their correct solution. Each individual is so joined to society that he can make no movement, think no thought, and express no feeling without testifying to the degree of his connectedness with society, to his social interest. From this it follows that suicide is a solution only for one who in the face of an urgent problem has arrived at the end of his limited social interest.

This coming to the end of their limited social interest shows itself in all failures, be they active or passive, in their greater development of the inferiority complex. That the suicide departs from the line of social interest is quite obvious. All forms of working together, of living together, and of fellowship are lacking. Further, it must certainly be admitted that this departure occurs in an active way. The activity has a particular curve, however, in that it runs apart from social life and against it, and that it harms the individual himself, not without giving pain and sorrow to others.

The suicide generally gives little or no (conscious) thought to the shock which he causes others. But this difficulty in the way of a further understanding can be resolved. Could it not be that he would have to eliminate others from his thoughts before he could commit suicide? In some cases his social interest might well be great enough for that. Moreover one finds quite frequently, by contrast, that in his last letter or words the suicide hints at asking forgiveness for the sorrow he has afflicted. The movement and the direction of the suicide cannot avoid the fact of sorrow to another. And perhaps there are many on the brink of suicide who, through greater social interest, are deterred from afflicting this sorrow to another.

The "other" is probably never lacking. Usually it is the one who suffers most by the suicide.

Predisposing Factors

Individual Psychology continuously seeks to understand the unity and self-consistency of the individual. We are prepared for failures and try to prevent them, always in the conviction that the origin of a misconception of life and its organization can be traced back into early childhood. Therefore we must try to find the type of child which can be regarded as the potential suicide type. Studies of the past life and the childhood of suicides and of those who have attempted it always bring to light those traits which we have found in similar forms in all those failures who combine lesser social interest with a relatively large degree of activity. Suicidal persons have always been problem children, spoiled at least by one side of the family, very complacent, and oversensitive. Very often they showed hurt feelings to an unusual degree. In case of a loss or defeat, they were always poor losers. While they seldom make a direct attack against others, they always showed a life style which attempted to influence others through increased complaining, sadness, and suffering. A tendency to collapse under psychological pain when confronted with difficult life situations often stood out, in addition to increased ambition, vanity, and consciousness of their value for others. Fantasies of sickness or death, in which the pain of others reaches its highest degree, went parallel with this firm belief in their high values for others, a belief which they usually acquired from the pampering situation of their childhood. I have found similar traits in the early history of cases of depression, whose type borders on that of the suicide, and also of alcoholics and drug addicts.

Among the early childhood expressions of the suicide one also finds the deepest grieving over often negligible matters, strong wishes to become sick or to die when a humiliation is experienced, tantrums with willful self-injury, and an attitude toward others as if it were their duty

to fulfill his every wish. Occasionally inclinations toward self-accusation come to the fore which elicit the sympathy of others, deeds of exaggerated foolhardiness which are performed to frighten others, and at times stubborn hunger strikes which intimidate the parents. Sometimes one finds ruses in the nature of a direct or indirect attack against others, acts of aggression followed by suicide, or only fantasies, wishes, and dreams which aim at a direct attack while suicide follows later.

Examples of suicide in the family have an attraction for those of similar tendency, as do the example of friends and well-known persons and special places associated with suicide.

Summary

Reduced to the simplest form, the life style of the potential suicide is characterized by the fact that he hurts others by dreaming himself into injuries or by administering them to himself. One will seldom go wrong in determining against whom the attack is aimed when one has found who is actually affected most by it. We find in the suicide the type who thinks too much of himself, too little of others, and who is unable sufficiently to play, function, live, and die with others. Rather, with an exaggerated consciousness of his own worth, he expects with great tension results which are always favorable for him.

The idea of suicide, like all other mistaken solutions, of course always breaks out in the face of an urgent confronting exogenous problem for which the individual in question has an insufficient social interest. His greater or lesser activity then determines the direction and development of the symptoms. The symptoms can be done away with through an understanding of the context.

The psychiatrist will do well to keep his diagnosis of a potential suicide to himself, but to take all precautions. He must not tell it to others, but must see to it that something is done for the patient to enable him to find a better, more independent, socially oriented attitude toward life.

CARL GUSTAV JUNG (1875–1961)

from *Letters* (expanded in Archive)

July 10, 1946
July 25, 1946
Oct. 13, 1951
Nov. 10, 1955

Carl Gustav Jung, born Karl Gustav II Jung, is regarded as the founder of analytical psychology. He was born in Kesswil, Switzerland, the son of a poor Protestant clergyman and philologist who taught him Latin at an early age. Although at first pressured to become a minister like many in his family, Jung eventually decided to become a psychiatrist, receiving his M.D. degree from the University of Zurich in 1902. Despite his focus on scientific topics, Jung integrated many religious, philosophical, and archeological works into his studies. Working with asylum patients under Eugen Bleuler, a pioneer in mental illness research, Jung

studied patients' responses to stimulus words, and termed the group of associations they avoided a "complex." Between 1907 and 1912, Jung collaborated closely with Sigmund Freud, whose theories were supported by Jung's results and who for a while regarded Jung as his outstanding disciple; however, the pair split in disagreement over the role of sexuality in neurosis and the development of children. Jung's subsequent publications, Psychology of the Unconscious *(1912) and* Psychological Types *(1921), ran counter to Freud's arguments and established Jung's unique views in psychology. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Jung served as professor of psychology at the Federal Polytechnic University in Zurich. He was appointed professor of medical psychology at the University of Basel in 1943, but was forced to resign almost immediately because of his poor health. He continued to write prolifically until well into his 80s.*

Among the many concepts that Jung originated were those of "extroverted" and "introverted" personalities (into which two classes he divided most men), the "collective unconscious," and the theory of "archetypes." Jung's ideas have influenced not only psychiatry, but also the fields of religion, literature, and parapsychology. Jung interpreted Christianity as an essential step in the historical development of consciousness and argued that heretical movements were archetypal constituents of religion not fully contained in Christianity. Jung pioneered therapy for older patients who had lost their faith in life. Individuation, or the ingrained capacity to reconcile complementary oppositions in one's personality, including one's basic bisexuality, and thus undergo the process of full human development, is at the core of Jung's teachings. Neuroses are merely impulses to broaden one's consciousness toward self-realization and totality. Jung conceived of therapy as an active and analytic process, steering away from Freud's free associations into a form of directed associations. Various societies around the world serve as centers for the development of Jung's teachings and provide training for new Jungian analysts.

In these selections from Jung's collected Letters*—some originally in English, some in German—Jung communicates with acquaintances who are dealing with suicide. Jung frequently used letters as a way of communicating his views to the outside world (he sent copies to people whose judgment he trusted) and correcting misinterpretations of and expanding on his views. In the three letters addressed to people who have evidently written to him because of his fame, he appears to argue that suicide is a denial of full self-realization, as is clearly evident in the letter of July 10, 1946, addressed to an elderly resident of Germany and the letters of October 13, 1951, and November 10, 1955, to two different "Mrs. N"s. In the more reflective letter of July 25, 1946, addressed to his acquaintance Dr. Eleanor Bertine, however, he appears to adopt an almost fatalistic attitude toward suicide—"I'm convinced that if anybody has it in himself to commit suicide, then practically the whole of his being is going that way"—and arguing against interference or prevention.*

Source

Carl Gustav Jung, *Letters*, eds. Gerhard Adler with Aniela Jaffé, tr. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953, 1975), Vol. 1, pp. 434–37, Vol. 2, pp. 25–26, 278–279.

from LETTERS

Dear Sir, 10 July 1946

. . . The idea of suicide, understandable as it is, does not seem commendable to me. We live in order to attain the greatest possible amount of spiritual development and self-awareness. As long as life is possible, even if only in a minimal degree, you should hang on to it, in order to scoop

it up for the purpose of conscious development. To interrupt life before its time is to bring to a standstill an experiment which we have not set up. We have found ourselves in the midst of it and must carry it through to the end. . . .

Yours sincerely, C. G. JUNG

Dear Dr. Eleanor Bertine, 25 July 1946

. . . I should have thanked you for your careful reports about Kristine Mann's illness and death long ago,[1] but I never found time enough to do so. . . .

It is really a question whether a person affected by such a terrible illness should or may end her life. It is my attitude in such cases not to interfere. I would let things happen if they were so, because I'm convinced that if anybody has it in himself to commit suicide, then practically the whole of his being is going that way. I have seen cases where it would have been something short of criminal to hinder the people because according to all rules it was in accordance with the tendency of their unconscious and thus the basic thing. So I think nothing is really gained by interfering with such an issue. It is presumably to be left to the free choice of the individual. Anything that seems to be wrong to us can be right under certain circumstances over which we have no control and the end of which we do not understand. If Kristine Mann had committed suicide under the stress of unbearable pain, I should have thought that this was the right thing. As it was not the case, I think it was in her stars to undergo such a cruel agony for reasons that escape our understanding. Our life is not made entirely by ourselves. The main bulk of it is brought into existence out of sources that are hidden to us. Even complexes can start a century or more before a man is born. There is something like karma. . . .

Yours sincerely, C. G. JUNG

Dear Mrs. N., 13 October 1951

. . . It isn't possible to kill part of your "self" unless you kill yourself first. If you ruin your conscious personality, the so-called ego-personality, you deprive the self of its real goal, namely to become real itself. The goal of life is the realization of the self. If you kill yourself you abolish that will of the self that guides you through life to that eventual goal. An attempt at suicide doesn't affect the intention of the self to become real, but it may arrest your personal development inasmuch as it is not explained. You ought to realize that suicide is murder, since after suicide there remains a corpse exactly as with any ordinary murder. Only it is yourself that has been killed. That is the reason why the Common Law punishes a man that tries to commit suicide, and it is psychologically true too. Therefore suicide certainly is not the proper answer.

As long as you don't realize the nature of this very dangerous impulse you block the way to further development, just as a man who intends to commit a theft, without knowing what he is intending and without realizing the ethical implication of such a deed, cannot develop any further unless he takes into account that he has a criminal tendency. Such tendencies are very frequent, only they don't always succeed and there is hardly anybody who must not realize in this or

[1] Kristine Mann had died on 12 Nov. 45. About 3 or 4 months before her death, while in hospital with a good deal of pain, depressed and unhappy, Dr. Mann saw one morning an ineffable light glowing in her room. It lasted for about an hour and a half and left her with a deep sense of peace and joy. The recollection of it remained indelible, although after that experience her state of health worsened steadily and her mind deteriorated. Jung felt that at the time of the experience her spirit had left her body.

any other way that he has a dark shadow following him. That is the human lot. If it were not so, we might get perfect one day which might be pretty awful too. We shouldn't be naïve about ourselves and in order not to be we have to climb down to a more modest level of self-appreciation.

Hoping I have answered your question, I remain,

Yours sincerely, C. G. JUNG

Thank you for the fee.
Nothing more is needed.

Dear Mrs. N., 19 November 1955

I am glad that you do understand the difficulty of your request. How can anybody be expected to be competent enough to give such advice? I feel utterly incompetent—yet I cannot deny the justification of your wish and I have no heart to refuse it. If your case were my own, I don't know what could happen to me, but I am rather certain that I would not plan a suicide ahead. I should rather hang on as long as I can stand my fate or until sheer despair forces my hand. The reason for such an "unreasonable" attitude with me is that I am not at all sure what will happen to me after death. I have good reasons to assume that things are not finished with death. Life seems to be an interlude in a long story. It has been long before I was, and it will most probably continue after the conscious interval in a three-dimensional existence. I shall therefore hang on as long as it is humanly possible and I try to avoid all forgone conclusions, considering seriously the hints I got as to the *post mortem* events.

Therefore I cannot advise you to commit suicide for so-called reasonable considerations. It is murder and a corpse is left behind, no matter who has killed whom. Rightly the English Common Law punishes the perpetrator of the deed. Be sure first, whether it is really the will of God to kill yourself or merely your reason. The latter is positively not good enough. If it should be the act of sheer despair, it will not count against you, but a willfully planned act might weigh heavily against you.

This is my incompetent opinion. I have learned caution with the "perverse." I do not underestimate your truly terrible ordeal. In deepest sympathy,

Yours cordially, C. G. JUNG

JOHN HAYNES HOLMES (1879–1964)

from *Is Suicide Justifiable?* (expanded in Archive)

John Haynes Holmes, an American clergyman and author, was one of the leaders of the Social Gospel movement in Protestantism. Holmes was born in Philadelphia to a family of meager circumstances; he planned to enter the family music publication business, but his success in school prompted his teachers to prepare him for higher education. After extensive study in history and the classics, Holmes attended both Harvard College and Divinity School on scholarships, graduating in 1904. After serving

as a minister, he was elected president of the Free Religious Association and the General Unitarian Conference. Holmes, a lifelong pacifist, resigned from the American Unitarian Organization over differences of opinion on World War I in 1918 along with his loyal congregation, renaming his church the Community Church of New York, which was known for its social service and civic instruction programs.

In 1906, Holmes helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After discovering the work of Gandhi, Holmes helped to popularize his views in the United States. Often involved in major civil liberties controversies, including, in 1928, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, he helped found the American Civil Liberties Union. He advocated reformation of conventional religious organizations and ideas and was heavily involved in social and political causes. As a pacifist and an advocate of socialism, Holmes refused to support the government in either world war. He argued that war and violence, once started, only perpetuate themselves. He was also a cofounder and member of the New York City Affairs Committee, which investigated political corruption, and he traveled widely in supporting the causes of labor unions and the American Zionists. Holmes retired from religious leadership in 1949, but he continued to pursue his interests until his death at age 85.

In addition to his public lectures and writings, Holmes wrote stories, poems, hymns, and a play. In his book, Is Suicide Justifiable, *Holmes attempts to distinguish martyrdom, heroism, and self-sacrifice, which are praiseworthy, from suicide, which is not. To do so, he examines several sets of parallel cases, including the deaths in battle of, on the one hand, Brutus, and on the other, the Swiss hero Arnold von Winkelried. Holmes's attempt to define suicide takes the form of identifying what he takes to be its central, reprehensible feature: it is an act of both irresponsible if not blasphemous egoism and cowardly desertion from one's problems in life.*

Source

John Haynes Holmes, *Is Suicide Justifiable?* (New York: John Day Co., 1934), pp. 19–30.

from IS SUICIDE JUSTIFIABLE?

What *is* suicide? The dictionary tells us, simply and plainly, that suicide is the act of voluntarily destroying one's life, or of deliberately placing this life in fatal, or merely serious jeopardy. But is this all? Is there not more involved? Is not the phenomenon more complicated? Surely there are persons who have hazarded their lives, thrown them deliberately, even gaily away, and yet not committed suicide at all. A man may forfeit his life, in other words, by a direct decision of the will, and yet not for a moment come under the "canon 'gainst self-slaughter." Familiar examples of voluntary death can be matched point by point, and immediately instances which are suicide be clearly distinguished from instances which are *not* suicide.

Thus, in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Julius Cesar*, there is a closing scene in which Brutus is presented by the dramatist as fleeing from his foes. Beaten on the field of Philippi, he is hotly pursued, and at last surrounded. Unwilling to surrender or to be captured, and thus to suffer the humiliation of falling into the hands of Antony, he decides to kill himself. So he orders his friend,

Strato, to hold his sword, and, with one last despairing cry, rushes upon the poisoned blade, and perishes. The character of the deed is obvious. "The noblest Roman of them all" has committed suicide.

Now, compare this death of Brutus with the death of the famous Arnold von Winkelried at the battle of Sempach! The Swiss people were fighting for the freedom of their country from the rule of Austria. Their soldiers had again and again attacked the Austrian line, but had found it impossible to break through the solid clump of spears which were raised against them. At the critical moment a single soldier was seen to rush from the Swiss ranks and deliberately impale himself upon the lifted spears. This was Arnold von Winkelried. As he fell, he stretched out his arms, and embracing as many of the spear-heads as he could reach, fiercely thrust them into his bosom. In so doing, he broke down a portion of the Austrian line, and thus opened the way through which his comrades poured their forces, and thus turned the tide of battle. Von Winkelried's act, in its outward aspects, was almost identical with that of Brutus. As the Roman ran upon the sword, so the Switzer ran upon the spears. But what was plainly suicide in the one case was as plainly *not* suicide in the other. The two deeds, similar in appearance, were fundamentally different in character.

A few weeks ago I read in the morning newspaper of the death of a woman in the New York subway. She had thrown herself in front of a train. Standing quietly on the edge of the platform until the train appeared, she had jumped to the track just the right moment and been ground to pieces beneath the turning wheels. This was obviously suicide.

A few years ago a similar event occurred in England. A woman, standing quietly on the edge of a racetrack, suddenly leaped in front of the horses as they galloped around the turn, and was killed upon the instant by their pounding hoofs. When the victim was picked up, she was found to be a suffragette, in the ranks of Mrs. Pankhurst's followers, who had deliberately chosen this method of protesting against the disfranchisement of women in Great Britain. She had killed herself voluntarily, in almost exactly the same way the American woman had killed herself voluntarily. But was she a suicide? The thousands of men and women who marched in her funeral procession through the streets of London did not think so. On the contrary, they regarded and reverenced her as a martyr to a great cause.

One more parallel example! Some years ago a man, a friend and parishioner of mine, came to consult me about his will. After several meetings, we reached a definite agreement upon the disposal of his property under my direction. The next day I received the shocking news that he had gone from my study to his home, and, after making every last preparation, had turned on the gas, laid down quietly on his bed and awaited the end. The authorities pronounced this act suicide.

Some months ago the Mahatma of India, after a series of negotiations with officials and friends, solemnly announced that he was about to "fast unto death." Unless certain agreements could be reached between Hindus and English, he said, he would refuse all food until he died. At the appointed hour, Gandhi laid himself down upon his cot and began his fast. Day after day he refused food and steadily grew weaker. In a few more days he would undoubtedly have perished, by his own hand, so to speak, had not the agreements, upon which he had insisted for the redemption of the Untouchables of India, been happily reached and thus released him from his vow. If the Mahatma had died, would this have been suicide? Not at all! The millions in India and around the world who watched with bated breath the progress of the famous fast, knew they

were looking not upon an act of suicide, but upon one of the most sublime instances of sacrifice in history.

These three parallels are illuminating. In every outward aspect the members of each pair of examples are the same. Brutus and Winkelried both impaled themselves on deadly weapons; the woman in the subway and the woman on the racetrack both threw themselves in the way of forces certain to destroy them; my friend in New York and the Mahatma in India both laid themselves down to await death which they had themselves decreed. But while these respective deeds are outwardly identical, they are inwardly distinct. On the one had is suicide; on the other, sacrifice. Where is the difference? When is suicide *not* suicide? When are the voluntary dead not unhappy victims but glorious martyrs?

The answer to these questions is not far to seek. The distinction between the instances, as compared and contrasted, is at least three-fold:

First, in the case of the martyrs, so-called, it is to be noticed that the occasions of death lie altogether outside themselves. These occasions exist apart from their own problems and interests as persons. The martyrs do what they do for the reasons which are utterly unselfish. In the case of the suicides, on the other hand, the occasions of death lie inside the lives of the dead. These occasions belong to themselves as a part of their own intimate experiences and desires. The suicides do what they do primarily in their own interest, or in the interest of others only in relation to themselves.

Secondly, in order to meet these occasions of death, the martyrs have to plunge into the thick of life, face the fearful impact of some national or world crisis, and thus live, for the moment, at least, more fiercely and terribly than they have ever lived before. But the suicides, in killing themselves, withdraw from life and desert the world. The martyrs turn outward, so to speak, and challenge the injustices and cruelties of society. The suicides, *per contra*, turn inward, and thus away from society, and destroy their lives that they may be delivered from the problem of living at all.

Thirdly, there is the impressive fact that the martyrs and heroes are *giving* their lives as precious offerings for some great cause of humankind. Thus, Arnold von Winkelried gave his life for the freedom of his country, the English suffragette for the emancipation of women, the Indian Mahatma for the redemption of the Untouchables. But with the suicides there is no question of the giving of life for anything. On the contrary, these victims of self-violence are engaged not in giving their lives, but in *taking* them. The act of suicide, in other words, is invariably an act not of sacrifice but of self-assertion. The victim is affirming fundamentally that his life is his own, not the world's and that he will take it and throw it away at any time for purposes satisfactory to himself.

It is this final distinction between giving and taking one's life which marks what is basically different, morally speaking, between suicide and martyrdom. Such distinction, of course, is not always perfectly clear. There are border-line cases which confuse opinion and suspend judgment. The man who kills himself, for example, to relieve his family of the burden of his disability from fatal disease, or to give his family the financial help of his insurance policies! He is undoubtedly sacrificing himself for others, though not by their desire nor in their ultimate and higher interest; but he is also undoubtedly escaping from the pain and worry of his own tragic plight. It is in this sense—clearly in most cases, confusedly in a few cases—that suicide is to be described as fundamentally an escape-mania. Suicide may be defined as the act of running away from life. The man who commits suicide, for any motive, is essentially abandoning his task and his duty. He is surrendering his sword before the battle is either lost or won. Consciously or unconsciously, nobly

or ignobly, he is attempting to shift burdens, evade responsibilities, avoid consequences. The definite thing he does is to step out of the picture. The martyr, in his act of dying, plays a decisive, though tragic role in the drama of life—the whole play may turn upon what he has done. But the suicide leaves the stage, and lets the play go on as best it can without him.

VIRGINIA WOOLF (1882–1941)

from *Mrs. Dalloway* (in Archive only)
from *A Room of One's Own* (expanded in Archive)
Journal Entry, May 15, 1940
Letter to Leonard Woolf

Virginia Woolf, the English novelist and literary critic, profoundly influenced both the modern literary form and feminist criticism. She was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London and educated at home by her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, a prominent philosopher and biographer. Although her father held that suicide in preference to a life of agony was clearly moral, he did not kill himself, but died of cancer. After her father's death, when Virginia was 23, she, her sister, and her two brothers moved to a home in the Bloomsbury district of London, a home that soon became a place of gathering for an intellectual circle called the Bloomsbury group. This group included art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry, economist John Maynard Keynes, novelist E. M. Forster, and writer Leonard Woolf, whom Virginia later married in 1912.

Woolf's many novels, including The Voyage Out *(1915),* Jacob's Room *(1922),* Mrs. Dalloway *(1925), and* To the Lighthouse *(1927), significantly altered and expanded conventional novelistic form with new techniques like stream-of-consciousness, unique plotting, and focus on the interiority of characters, revealing their inner thoughts by their effects on their surroundings. Woolf also contributed significantly as a literary critic and essayist. Her most important essays, like the landmark* A Room of One's Own *(1929), focused on the role of women in history and literature, and established Woolf as one of the founders of feminist criticism.*

Virginia Woolf suffered throughout her life from a debilitating mental and physical illness that, although never fully identified (believed in her day to be a disease of the nerves), may have been bipolar disorder, exacerbated by drug therapies and lengthy and confining bed rest. According to the writings of both Woolf and her husband Leonard, the illness was intermittent, often intensifying into dramatic and horrifying episodes that included severe pain, nausea, and delirium, and that provoked at least three suicide attempts. In the novel Mrs. Dalloway, *Woolf invents the character of Septimus, who suffers from a similar condition and whose experiences are clearly representative of the same traumas she endured. Through her depiction of Septimus's illness and his treatment by Dr. Holmes and the specialist Sir William Bradshaw, Woolf indicts the medical institution, which she felt was dismissive and unhelpful, and which she believed made the ailment worse through drug treatments, confinement,*

forced eating, and no visitations or writing allowed. In the novel, after experiencing this sort of treatment, Septimus commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window, the same way Woolf herself had attempted suicide during a violent episode of her illness.

Some scholars have argued that Woolf's interest in women's issues was in part provoked by her experiences with the medical institution. In A Room of One's Own, *Woolf imagines a woman of literary genius in the Elizabethan period, Judith Shakespeare, the sister of William Shakespeare [q.v.]. For the imaginary Judith, however, existing social constraints and imposed expectations of cultural roles for women provided only a few drastic options for escape: suicide or madness. Judith chooses suicide.*

Woolf explored suicide in other, actual contexts as well. A journal entry from 1940 reveals that Virginia and her husband Leonard ("L." in the entry) discussed suicide in the event that Germany successfully invaded Britain. She describes the discussion as "sensible, rather matter of fact talk."

Suicide was always a possibility for Woolf. Although it is true that neither restrictive cultural expectations nor the medical institution were the sole cause of Woolf's recurrent depressions, she did believe that they made its effects far worse, and that by continuing the prescribed treatment of the doctors, she could never escape from her suffering. On March 28, 1941, as she felt another exacerbation of her illness coming on, Virginia Woolf drowned herself. Many critics and scholars have argued about Woolf's reasons for committing suicide. In a letter written to her husband shortly before her death, Woolf indicates that she intends to kill herself because she believes that another breakdown is impending. The letter has been variously interpreted as both revealing that Woolf made a rational decision to prevent further anguish, and as showing that Woolf was already suffering from the effects of mental illness.

Sources

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1953), pp. 91–102, 147–151; *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), pp. 46–49; journal entry, Wednesday 15 May, 1940, from *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. V, 1936–1941, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), pp. 284–285; letter to Leonard Woolf, Tuesday, 18? March 1941, from *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. VI, 1936–1941, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 481.

from A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting-rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one; what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night. They had no money evidently; according to Professor Trevelyan they were married whether they liked it or not before they were out of the nursery, at fifteen or sixteen very likely. It would have been extremely odd, even upon this showing, had one of them suddenly written the plays of Shakespeare, I concluded, and I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past,

present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. He wrote to the papers about it. He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.

Be that as it may, I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that the bishop was right at least in this; it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighborhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter—indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last—for she was very

young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows—at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was—it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald, I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.

JOURNAL ENTRY: WEDNESDAY 15 MAY, 1940

An appeal last night for home defence—against parachutists. L. says he'll join. An acid conversation. Our nerves are harassed—mine at least: L. evidently relieved by the chance of doing something. Gun & uniform to me slightly ridiculous. Behind that the strain: this morning we discussed suicide if Hitler lands. Jews beaten up. What point in waiting? Better shut the garage doors. This a sensible, rather matter of fact talk.

LETTER TO LEONARD WOOLF

Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex, Tuesday [18? March 1941]

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shant recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight it any longer, I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that—everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.

I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.

V.

On 11 May 1941 Leonard noted at the foot of this letter: "This is the letter left for me on the table in the sitting room which I found at 1 on March 28."

PAUL TILLICH (1886–1965)

from *The Courage to Be*

Paul Tillich was a German-American theologian whose work helped to revolutionize Protestant theology in light of a philosophical analysis of existence. Born in a small Prussian town, the son of an authoritarian Lutheran minister, Tillich attended universities in Berlin, Tübingen, and Halle before receiving a doctorate from Breslau in 1911, as well as a licentiate of theology from Halle in 1912. As an ordained Lutheran minister and chaplain in the German army, Tillich joined forces with the religious social movement, which struggled to expand social opportunity and justice while opposing both the utopian delusions of Marxism, as well as the individualism and otherworldliness of the dominant forms of Christianity.

Tillich's early work examined how tradition could coexist with autonomy and freedom. In The Religious Situation *(1932), Tillich viewed religion as the ultimate concern of humanity that underlies 20th-century changes in art, politics, and philosophy. Because of his criticism of Hitler, in 1933,*

he was barred from teaching, and he emigrated to the United States to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Tillich continued to publish sermons and articles on theology and history. Systematic Theology *(1951–63), his three-volume magnum opus, presents God not as a being—an anthropomorphic, personal God—but as Being-itself, or ultimate reality; this work attempted to integrate traditional Christianity with contemporary concerns including existential uncertainty, the scientific method, and psychoanalysis. Christian doctrines are seen as resolutions of practical human problems.*

In this selection from Tillich's popular The Courage to Be *(1952), suicide is explored in relation to anxiety and despair. Suicide only partially liberates the soul from anxiety, Tillich says; the inescapable guilt and condemnation of despair frustrate the attempt to escape them through this finite act.*

Source

Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 54–57.

from THE COURAGE TO BE

The Meaning of Despair

Despair is an ultimate or "boundary-line" situation. One cannot go beyond it. Its nature is indicated in the etymology of the word despair: without hope. No way out into the future appears. Nonbeing is felt as absolutely victorious. But there is a limit to its victory; nonbeing is *felt* as victorious, and feeling presupposes being. Enough being is left to feel the irresistible power of nonbeing, and this is the despair within the despair. The pain of despair is that a being is aware of itself as unable to affirm itself because of the power of nonbeing. Consequently it wants to surrender this awareness and its presupposition, the being which is aware. It wants to get rid of itself—and it cannot. Despair appears in the form of reduplication, as the desperate attempt to escape despair. If anxiety were only the anxiety of fate and death, voluntary death would be the way out of despair. The courage demanded would be the courage *not* to be. The final form of ontic self-affirmation would be the act of ontic self-negation.

But despair is also the despair about guilt and condemnation. And there is no way of escaping it, even by ontic self-negation. Suicide can liberate one from the anxiety of fate and death—as the Stoics knew. But it cannot liberate from the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, as the Christians know. This is a highly paradoxical statement, as paradoxical as the relation of the moral sphere to ontic existence generally. But it is a true statement, verified by those who have experienced fully the despair of condemnation. It is impossible to express the inescapable character of condemnation in ontic terms, that is in terms of imaginings about the "immortality of the soul." For every ontic statement must use the categories of finitude, and "immortality of the soul" would be the endless prolongation of finitude and of the despair of condemnation (a self-contradictory concept, for "finis" means "end"). The experience, therefore, that suicide is no way of escaping guilt

must be understood in terms of the qualitative character of the moral demand, and of the qualitative character of its rejection. Guilt and condemnation are qualitatively, not quantitatively, infinite. They have an infinite weight and cannot be removed by a finite act of ontic self-negation. This makes despair desperate, that is, inescapable. There is "No Exit" from it (Sartre). The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness participates in both the ontic and moral element in despair. Insofar as it is an expression of finitude it can be removed by ontic self-negation: This drives radical skepticism to suicide. Insofar as it is a consequence of moral disintegration it produces the same paradox as the moral element in despair: there is no ontic exit from it. This frustrates the suicidal trends in emptiness and meaninglessness. One is aware of their futility.

In view of this character of despair it is understandable that all human life can be interpreted as a continuous attempt to avoid despair. And this attempt is mostly successful. Extreme situations are not reached frequently and perhaps they are never reached by some people. The purpose of an analysis of such a situation is not to record ordinary human experiences but to show extreme possibilities in the light of which the ordinary situations must be understood. We are not always aware of our having to die, but in the light of the experience of our having to die our whole life is experienced differently. In the same way the anxiety which is despair is not always present. But the rare occasions in which it is present determine the interpretation of existence as a whole.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN (1889–1951)

from *Notebooks 1914–1916*

from *Letters*

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most original and influential philosophers of the 20th century, was born in Vienna, the youngest of eight children in a wealthy family headed by a stern steel tycoon who attempted to train his sons for careers in industry. At the age of 14, Wittgenstein was sent to a school in Linz that emphasized physical sciences and mathematics. He later moved to Berlin where he studied mechanical engineering, and then England to do his doctorate in experimental aeronautics. While there, Wittgenstein read Bertrand Russell's Principles of Mathematics, *the book that galvanized his interests in philosophy and logic and led him to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied under Russell. In 1913, Wittgenstein abruptly left for Norway, where he worked in solitude on his* Notes on Logic, *posthumously edited and published first in 1957. Throughout his life, Wittgenstein continually sought solitude in bucolic settings, a lifestyle that he considered authentic and "pure." When World War I began, Wittgenstein served in the Austro-Hungarian*

army in Russia, where he was awarded multiple medals for bravery. At the end of 1918, he was one of many captured and imprisoned in Italy. While in an Italian prison camp, Wittgenstein completed the only book to be published in his lifetime, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus *(German, 1921; English, 1922), a work that Wittgenstein felt solved all philosophical problems. After the war, he gave up his fortune to his siblings and retired from philosophy, preferring to work as a teacher at several rural Austrian elementary schools, where he was unpopular. He also worked as a gardener, and, for two years, as the architect and designer of his sister's modernist house. In 1928, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge to teach, but he became increasingly dissatisfied with academics and, in 1936, again sought seclusion in Norway. For the next 15 years, he continued his philosophical work while travelling and working in a variety of capacities; he died of cancer in England in 1951.*

In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, *Wittgenstein attempted to define the philosophical problems that could be meaningfully addressed through language; he believed that his work definitively established the boundaries between the expressible and the nonsensical. In his early thought, he understood language as representing or "picturing"; later, however, he rejected his earlier view and came to see that absolute clarity of meaning was impossible and that the significance of words depended instead on the specific context of their use; language was to be seen in terms of doing, of participating in various "language games." Much of his later thought was published posthumously in* The Philosophical Investigations *(1952).*

Wittgenstein was no stranger to suicide. Wittgenstein, like his brothers, is known to have been plagued by a suicidal imagination throughout his life. At least two and perhaps three of Wittgenstein's brothers took their own lives. His brother Hans, a musical prodigy, fled to America to pursue a life immersed in music; in 1903, his family was informed that he had disappeared from a boat a year earlier, evidently a suicide. His brother Rudolf sought a career in the theater, but ended his life in a bar with a dramatic self-inflicted cyanide poisoning in 1904. Only six months earlier, Wittgenstein had learned of the suicide of young Otto Weininger, the author of Sex and Character *(1903), a work that influenced Wittgenstein's later thought. At the end of World War I, troops under the command of Wittgenstein's second oldest brother, Kurt, rebelled against his orders, and Kurt became the third brother to commit suicide.*

In these selections from the Notebooks *1914–16 (which include a few entries, like the one presented here, from January 1917) and the letters of May 30 and June 21, 1920, to "Mr. E" (his friend Paul Engelmann, who subsequently edited the letters), Wittgenstein discusses his confrontation with thoughts of suicide. In the* Notebooks, *he suggests the fundamental role in ethics of the issue of suicide, and whether suicide is "the elementary sin" or is "neither good nor evil." In the letters, which he wrote while in a suicidal state himself, Wittgenstein describes suicide as "a dirty thing to do" and insists that one cannot will one's own destruction; it can only happen as a "rushing of one's defenses."*

Sources

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, eds. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 91e; Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, tr. L. Furtmuller (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1967), no pagination, letters no. 32, 33.

from NOTEBOOKS, 1914–1916

January 10, 1917

If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed.
If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.
This throws a light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin.
And when one investigates it it is like investigating mercury vapour in order to comprehend the nature of vapours.
Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil?

from LETTERS

May 30, 1920

D. Mr. E.,—Why don't I hear from you any more?! (Presumably because you don't write to me.) I feel like completely emptying myself again; I have had a most miserable time lately. Of course only as a result of my own baseness and rottenness. I have continually thought of taking my own life, and the idea still haunts me sometimes. *I have sunk to the lowest point*. May you never be in that position! Shall I ever be able to raise myself up again? Well, we shall see.—Reclam will not have my book. I don't care any more, and that is a good thing.

Write *soon*.

Yours
Ludwig Wittgenstein

June 21, 1920

D. Mr. E.,—Many thanks for your kind letter, which has given me much pleasure and thereby perhaps helped me a little, although as far as the merits of my case are concerned I am beyond any outside help.—In fact I am in a state of mind that is terrible to me. I have been through it several times before: it is the state of *not being able to get over a particular fact*. It is a pitiable state, I know. But there is only one remedy that I can see, and this is of course to come to terms with that fact. But this is just like what happens when a man who can't swim has fallen into the water and flails about with his hands and feet and feels that he *cannot* keep his head above water. That is the position I am in now. I know that to kill oneself is always a dirty thing to do. Surely one *cannot* will one's own destruction, and anybody who has visualized what is in practice involved in the act of suicide knows that suicide is always a *rushing of one's own defenses*. But nothing is worse than to be forced to take oneself by surprise.

Of course it all boils down to the fact that I have no faith! *Well, we shall see!*—Please thank your revered mother in my name for her kind letter. I will certainly come to Olmütz, but I don't know when. I do hope I can make it soon.

Yours
Ludwig Wittgenstein

MAO ZEDONG (1893–1976)

The Suicide of Miss Zhao (expanded in Archive)

Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-tung), the revolutionary who was to become the leading force in the establishment of the People's Republic of China, was born to the family of a small landowner. As was the custom among the peasantry, a marriage was arranged for Mao when he was 13 or 14 to a young woman some four years older, who was to provide labor for the family until the groom was mature, but Mao refused to acknowledge the arrangement, and the marriage was never consummated.

Mao's early education was in classical Confucian texts, but he also educated himself in Western political thought. In 1911, Mao left school to fight with the revolutionary army until 1912 when the Republic of China was formed. From 1913 to 1918, he was a student at the Hunan Provincial First Normal School at Changsha, where he increasingly rejected traditional Confucian values, such as family loyalty, and became politically active in forming radical student groups. He was at Peking University in the months leading up to the May Fourth Movement demonstrations of 1919 before returning to Changsha to teach. Committed to Marxism by early 1921, Mao played a major role in organizing the peasantry, developing guerilla tactics to resist the Guomindang (Kuomintang) and later the Japanese, promoting the methods of mass revolutionary violence, and eventually, as leader of the Chinese Communist Party, in the administration of the post-revolutionary state. In 1934–35, Mao led his followers on the Long March from Shanghai to a new base in northwest China. In 1949, Mao defeated Chinese nationalist forces under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). In the mid-1950s, as chairman of the People's Republic, he instituted reforms including the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958), intended to achieve economic reform and the institution of socialist and communist agrarian collectivization, and the Cultural Revolution (1966), intended to eradicate the reactionary cultural beliefs and practices of the past in order to make movement into a fully communist society possible. Ruthless purges, repressive social policies, and mass starvation, however, were among the methods and consequences of Mao's programs.

During his life, Mao wrote both practical and political works. These included works in the 1930s on guerilla strategy and tactics, the philosophical essay On Practice *(1937), and* On New Democracy *(1940), contrasting China's future form of government—which Mao saw as a "joint dictatorship" of several revolutionary classes—with the Russian Soviet's single "dictatorship of the proletariat."*

Mao's concern with theory, as well as practice, is reflected in the excerpts presented here from 10 short newspaper articles written in Changsha in 1919. Among his earliest political writings, these articles predate Mao's embrace of Marxism, but they clearly show elements of his social thinking and sustained critique of traditional Chinese social practices, especially "feudal" or "capitalist" marriage. His concern with "the woman question" and the reform of the marriage laws (eventually enacted in 1950 to prohibit "polygamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference with the remarriage of widows, and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriage") are clearly evident here. The articles

date from the May Fourth period of 1919, a movement named after student demonstrations protesting the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference's award of German holdings in Shandong (Shantung) province to Japan instead of returning them to China; this period's "new thought tide" involved a rapid intellectual shift among Chinese radicals from Confucianism to Marxism/Leninism. The May Fourth period also saw a shift from classical literary diction to much more accessible, colloquial language—often based, as these articles by Mao are, on a specific case study.

The case to which Mao was responding was an incident that became a cause célèbre in Changsha. Miss Zhao Wuzhen (Chao Wu-chen), a young peasant woman of Changsha, was engaged to marry the widower Wu Fenglin (Wu Feng-lin) on November 14, 1919; the marriage had been arranged by her parents and the matchmaker, as was traditional in the China of the time, occurring in some 80% of marriages. Miss Zhao had met her fiancé only in brief ritual encounters, but she did not wish to marry a widower, even a rich one, and found him old and ugly. Her parents refused to cancel the wedding or even to postpone its date. On the day of the wedding, as she was being raised in the locked and sealed bridal sedan chair to be transported to the home of the groom, Miss Zhao took out a dagger she had concealed in the chair and slit her throat.

Mao's articles, published Nov. 16–28, 1919, in the leading Changsha daily Dagongbao (Ta Kung Pao)*, attempt to identify the causes of the tragedy—not an uncommon one, as suicide was often the only means of escape for women. Mao understands the suicide as the product of Miss Zhao's untenable social circumstances in being constrained by social customs that fail to recognize the independence and value of women—customs that, in treating half of China's population in this way, were a source of China's weakness. Mao rejects the traditional ideal of the woman as subject to ruler, father, and husband, and of the female martyr, who would die to preserve her chastity. Indeed, for Mao, Miss Zhao's suicide was not really a suicide—she did not wish to die, but could not live in the society she inhabited. Suicide, he holds, is in fact wrong, but this suicide in his view was much more nearly a case of murder—by society. This provided the impetus for social reform.*

The incident of Miss Zhao and other suicides became a focus of the May Fourth literature, which included several hundred articles on these topics. Three months after the suicide of Miss Zhao, too late for Mao to comment on it in this series, another young woman of Changsha, Li Jicun (Miss Li Chi-ts'un), also found herself faced with an arranged marriage she loathed: instead of killing herself, Miss Li ran away to Beijing (Peking) to join the Work-Study Program and throw herself into the political struggle against opposition. This, argues Roxane Witke, is what Mao would have favored for Miss Zhao as well. Indeed, Mao himself had resisted a traditional marriage arranged for him.

Sources

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COMMENTARY ON THE SUICIDE OF MISS ZHAO

Miss Zhao's Suicide (November 16, 1919)

When something happens in society, we should not underrate its importance. The background of any event contains the multiple causes of its occurrence. For example, the event of a "person's death" can be explained in two ways. One is biological and physical, as in the case of "passing away in ripe old age." The other goes against biological and physical factors, as in the case of "premature death" or "unnatural death." The death of Miss Zhao by suicide belongs to the latter category of "unnatural death."

A person's suicide is determined entirely by circumstances. Was it Miss Zhao's original intent to seek death? No, it was to seek life. If, in the end, Miss Zhao chose death, it was because circumstances drove her to this. The circumstances in which Miss Zhao found herself included: (1) Chinese society, (2) the family living in the Zhao residence on Nanyang Street in Changsha, (3) the Wu family of the Orange Garden in Changsha, the family of the husband she did not want. These three factors constituted three iron nets, which we can imagine as a kind of triangular construction. Within these triangular iron nets, however much Miss Zhao sought life, there was no way for her to go on living. The opposite of life is death, and so Miss Zhao was obliged to die.

If one of these three factors had not been an iron net, or if one of the iron nets had opened, Miss Zhao would certainly not have died. (1) If Miss Zhao's parents had not used excessive compulsion, but had acceded to her own free will, she would certainly not have died. (2) If, while exercising compulsion, Miss Zhao's parents had allowed her to put her point of view to her fiancé's family, and to explain the reasons for her refusal, and if in the end her fiancé's family had accepted her point of view, and respected her individual freedom, Miss Zhao would certainly not have died. (3) If, even though neither her own parents nor her husband's family could accept her free will, there had been in society a powerful segment of public opinion to back her, and if there had been an entirely new world to which she could flee, in which her act of flight would be considered honorable and not dishonorable, Miss Zhao again would certainly not have died. If Miss Zhao is dead today, it is because she was solidly enclosed by the three iron nets (society, her own family, her fiancé's family); she sought life in vain, and finally was led to seek death.

. . . Yesterday's incident was very important. The background to this incident is the rottenness of the marriage system, and the darkness of the social system, in which there can be no independent ideas or views, and no freedom of choice in love. As we discuss different kinds of theories, we should discuss them in the light of real, living events. . . . In continuing this discussion and presenting some of my own views, I have done so with the express hope that others will earnestly discuss the case of this young woman, a martyr to freedom and to love, from many different perspectives, and will cry "Injustice!" on her behalf. . . .

The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality (November 18, 1919)

Someone asked me whether Miss Zhao had a personality or not. I said that I had two replies, one, that Miss Zhao did not have a personality of her own, the other, that she did have a personality.

What did I mean by saying that Miss Zhao did not have a personality? If Miss Zhao had had a personality, she would not have died. Why not? Having a personality requires respect from those one deals with. Its prerequisite is freedom of the will. Was Miss Zhao's will free? No, it was not free. Why wasn't it free? Because Miss Zhao had parents. In the West, the free will of children is not affected by the parents. In the Western family organization, father and mother recognize the free will of their sons and daughters. Not so in China. The commands of the parent and the will of the child are not at all on an equal footing. The parents of Miss Zhao very clearly forced her to love someone she did not want to love. No freedom of will was recognized at all. If you do not want to love me, but I force my love on you, that is a form of rape. This is called "direct rape." Their daughter did not want to love that person, but they forced their daughter to love that person. This, too, is a kind of rape, which is called "indirect rape." Chinese parents all indirectly rape their sons and daughters. This is the conclusion which inevitably arises under the Chinese family system of "parental authority," and the marriage system in which there is the "policy of parental arrangement." For Miss Zhao to have had a personality of her own she would have had to have a free will. For her to have a free will, her parents would have had to respect her and accede to her wishes. If Miss Zhao's parents had respected her, had acceded to her wishes, would she have been put into that cage-like bridal sedan chair in which she finally committed suicide? But it is now a fact that this happened. Thus, my first reply is that Miss Zhao did not have a personality of her own.

Why do I also say that she did have a personality? This is with reference to Miss Zhao herself. Although Miss Zhao lived for twenty-one years . . . and for twenty-one years her father and mother kept her from having a personality, in that last brief moment of her twenty-one years, her personality suddenly came forth. Alas, alas, death is preferable to the absence of freedom. The snow-white knife was stained with fresh red blood. The dirt road of Orange Garden Street, splashed with blood, was transformed into a solemn highway to heaven. And with this, Miss Zhao's personality also gushed forth suddenly, shining bright and luminous. Consequently, my second reply is that Miss Zhao did indeed have a personality of her own.

Thus, my conscience forces me to utter the following two sentences:

1) All parents who are like the parents of Miss Zhao should be put in prison.
2) May the cry of all humanity fill the heavens, "Long live Miss Zhao!"

The Marriage Question—An Admonition to Young Men and Women (November 19, 1919)

Three days ago, the Casual Comments section of this paper carried a piece by Mr. Jiangong, "Those Sacrificed to Reform of the Marriage System." Referring to the suicide of Miss Zhao, he addressed a warning to parents. It read as follows:

. . . not all Chinese are deaf and blind. Anyone with even a little tiny bit of conscience should be thoroughly awakened, and refrain from interfering in the marriages of his sons and daughters. This young woman did not die for nothing. . . . We must not fail her, we must not allow the sacrifice of her life to have been in vain.

The words of Mr. Jiangong say half of what must be said, but he left out the other half. Let me add the following.

Dear young men and women throughout China. None of you are deaf and blind. Having seen such a tragedy of "blood splattering the city of Changsha," you must be stirred to the depths of your souls, and become thoroughly awakened. See to it that you arrange your own marriages yourselves. The policy of letting parents arrange everything should absolutely be repudiated. Love is sacred, and absolutely cannot be arranged by others, cannot be forced, cannot be bought. We must not fail her, we must not allow the sacrifice of her life to have been in vain.

"The Evils of Society" and Miss Zhao (November 21, 1919)

My friend Mr. Yinbo [Peng Huang], in his editorial comments, . . . criticized my article, "Commentary on the Suicide of Miss Zhao," saying that I had placed all the blame on circumstances, letting Miss Zhao off scot-free, and that this was not right. He wrote, "The action of Miss Zhao was a weak and negative action. Such actions must never never be advocated." I am basically in total agreement with this positive critique. On the question of the suicide of Miss Zhao, I had originally intended to criticize her on several different small points. . . . [O]ne was precisely "against suicide." Mr. Yinbo's view and my view are really identical.

In the end, however, I cannot let "society" off. No matter how weak you might say Miss Zhao's act of committing suicide was, you cannot say she "died without cause." And the "cause" of her death, to one degree or another, indisputably did come from outside of herself, from society. Since society contains "causes" that could bring about Miss Zhao's death, this society is an extremely dangerous thing. . . . We must protest loudly, warn and awaken those fellow human beings who are not yet dead, and cry out: "Society is evil!"

I said that there were three factors that drove Miss Zhao to her death. One was her parent's family, one was her fiancé's family, and one was society. Ultimately, both her parents' family and her fiancé's family are each one component of society. We must understand that the parents' family and the fiancé's family are guilty of a crime, but the source of their crime lies in society. It is true that the two families could themselves have perpetrated this crime, but a great part of their culpability was transmitted to them by society. Moreover, if society were good, even if the families had wanted to perpetrate this crime, they would not have had the opportunity to do so. . . . Mr. Yinbo wonders why Miss Zhao didn't just run away, and he says that it would have been possible for her actually to do this. I say, true enough, but first let me raise a few questions, after which I shall present my view.

1) Within the city of Changsha there are more than forty peddlers of foreign goods. Within a 30-*li* radius of Shaoshan Village where I live there are seven or eight peddlers of mixed foreign and domestic goods.[1] Why is this?
2) Why is it that all the toilets in the city of Changsha are for men only, and none for women?

[1] The peddlers to whom Mao alludes were those who brought cotton cloth, particularly that used for women's undergarments and for children's clothes, to people's homes. The point of this reference is that, unlike the men referred to under item 6 below, who hung about silk shops, women were sequestered in their houses and could only wait for the peddlers to come to them.

3) Why is it you never see women entering a barber shop?
4) Why is it single women are never seen staying at hotels?
5) Why is it you never see women going into teahouses to drink tea?
6) Why is it that the customers hastening in and talking business in such silk shops as the Taihefeng or in stores selling foreign merchandise such as Yutaihua are never women, always men?
7) Why is it that of all the carters in the city not one is a woman, they are all men?
8) Why is it that at First Normal School outside South Gate there are no women students? And why are there no male students at Old Rice Field First Normal?

Anyone who knows the answers to these questions will understand why it was that Miss Zhao could not run away. The answers to these questions are not difficult. There is only one general answer, that "men and women are extremely segregated," that women are not allowed a place in society. In this society, in which "men and women are extremely segregated" and women are not allowed a place, even supposing Miss Zhao had wanted to run away, where would she have run to?

Concerning the Incident of Miss Zhao's Suicide (November 21, 1919)

In recent days there have been many commentaries on the incident of Miss Zhao's suicide. . . . This is a public event that concerns all mankind, and leaving aside those who advocate extreme individualism and living alone, everyone should pay attention to it and study it. Because for several thousand years perverse customs based on the [Confucian] rites have prevailed in China, women have had no status in any area of life. From politics, law, and education, to business, social relations, entertainment, and personal status, women have always been treated very differently from men, and relegated to the dark corners of society. Not only are they denied happiness, they are also subjected to many kinds of inhumane mistreatment. That this incident of a woman being driven to suicide should occur at a time like this, when the truth is very clear and there are loud calls for the liberation of women, shows just how profound are the evils of our nation's society. Today we need not express more pity for the deceased, but rather we should look for a method that will thoroughly correct this problem so that from now on such a tragedy as this will never happen again. But before we look for a method, we must first search for the controlling root causes of this domination.

Let us consider why it is that women have been bullied by men and have not been able to emancipate themselves for thousands of years. Regarding this point, we must examine the question of what, in the last analysis, are the defects of women? Looked at superficially, women have a lower level of knowledge than men, and are weaker willed than men. Women have deep emotional feelings, and when the emotions well up, one's conscious awareness recedes. In this respect, they are psychologically not the equals of men. Also, women are physically somewhat weaker, and to this must be added the suffering and painful difficulty of walking with bound feet. These are the physiological defects of women. Actually, none of these are inherent defects. Generally speaking, the psychological processes of women are not different from those of men. This has already been proven by the fact that the effects of education in all countries show no differences based on gender. The last two items of physical weakness are the result of custom. . . .

The relationship between men and women should, according to the contemporary view, center on "love," and apart from love, must not be governed by "economics." Thus the contemporary position is, "Each is economically independent, sharing the fruits of love." Before modern times, this was not the case. No one knew of the principle "Love is sacred." In the relationship between men and women, love was considered to be only secondary, while the core relationship remained economic, and was thus controlled by capitalism. . . . The methods by which women can become free and independent and never again be oppressed by men may in general be listed as follows:

1) A woman must never marry before she is physically mature.
2) Before marriage, at the bare minimum, a woman must be adequately prepared in knowledge and skills to live her own life.
3) A woman must prepare herself for living expenses after childbirth.

The above three items are the basic prerequisites for a woman's own personal independence. In addition, there is a further condition of "public child support," to which society should pay close attention. If women themselves are able to fulfill the above three conditions, and if society, for its part, provides for the public rearing of children, then marital relationships centered on love can be established. This will depend on the efforts of all us young men and women!

Against Suicide (November 23, 1919)

I have placed the blame for Miss Zhao's suicide on the circumstances that forced her to this. I have said nothing so far about "suicide" itself. On the question of suicide, scholars of ethics, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, have presented who knows how many arguments. Whether extolling or condemning suicide, their point of departure has always been their philosophies of life, how they viewed human life. My attitude toward suicide is to reject it, on several levels.

1) Ethics is the science of defining the objectives of human life and the methods for attaining the objectives of human life. Aside from a small number of pessimistic moral philosophers, the majority hold that the goal of man is "life.". . . But Paulsen says it is "developing all the human bodily and mental powers without exception to their highest, with no apologies for doing so." I feel that Paulsen's words, as a concrete expression of the objective of human life, are most apt. But this objective is definitely not attainable through suicide. Not only is suicide not a means for "developing to their highest the powers of the human body and spirit, with no apologies for doing so," it is ultimately the opposite. . . .
2) As to what is going through the mind of the person who commits suicide, we cannot really judge, since we have not had the experience of committing suicide. Living persons generally reject the concept of "death" and welcome the concept of "life." . . . Thus we have to say that those few who welcome "death" and reject "life" are exceptions to the rule . . . [and] may be seen as persons having a kind of mental abnormality.
3) Physiologically, a person's body is composed of cells, and the life of the person as a whole is the composite of the lives of the individual cells. The natural condition of cellular life is

to continue living until a certain age, at which time one dies of old age. Suicide is a revolt against this natural physiological condition. This natural physiological condition falls under the control of a kind of abnormal mentality, and is thereby terminated. We may say that this is a kind of physiological irregularity.

4) In the world of living things, very few of them commit suicide. Although there are tales about so-called loyal dogs or animals who have been faithful unto death, these are not common occurrences. Ordinarily animals delight in life, are adapted to their environments, and strive in every way to seek life.

To summarize the above, suicide has no place in ethics, in psychology, in physiology, or in biology. Thus the criminal law of many nations includes prohibitions against suicide. Social custom, too, celebrates life and grieves at death, and both of these attitudes are rooted in the "principle of seeking life."

Today we are concerned with why there are, after all, suicides in human society, and why they are not altogether rare, and also with the question of why we invariably express a feeling of respect for heroic suicides, and sometimes even suggest that it was "a good suicide." What is the reason for this?

My response to these two points is:

1) Before the idea of committing suicide develops, a person does not want to commit suicide, but rather wants to seek life. Moreover, his hope for life is unusually strong. Such an unusually strong hope as this can only be fulfilled under conditions which are at least adequate. If one's environment or poor treatment causes one's hopes to be repeatedly frustrated and turn into disappointment and loss of hope, then one will invariably seek death. . . . The reason why there are suicides in human society is that society has robbed that person completely of his "hope" and has left him "in utter despair.". . . If society robs a group or clan of people completely of hope, and leaves them in utter despair, then this group of clan will inevitably commit suicide, as in the case of the 500 Tianheng martyrs who all committed suicide at the same time,[2] or of Hong and Yang's army of 100,000 who set fire to themselves,[3] or the beginning of the Dutch war with a certain other state when they declared that if pressed too hard they would breach the sea dikes and drown themselves. . . .
2) We respect the heroic suicide for the following two reasons. First, because that person dares to do what others dare not do, we recognize that his spirit surpasses our own, and thus a feeling of respect arises unwittingly within us. Second, because of his spirit of rebellion against oppression, we recognize that although his body is dead, his aspirations live on (they do not actually continue to exist, but his suicide makes us feel as if they

[2] Tianheng (?–202 B.C.) was a nobleman of the state of Qi and a supporter of the king of Qi during the war between Chu and Han. When Liu Bang became king, Tianheng was unwilling to act as his subject, so committed suicide. Five hundred of his followers, on hearing of this incident, also took their own lives.

[3] The "army of Hong and Yang" refers to the forces of the Taipings. In July 1864 the capital of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was taken by Zeng Guofan's forces, after the campaign for which Mao earlier expressed such admiration. On the day the city fell, the Xiang Army ravaged the city, looting shops and killing many people. On seeing this, officers of the Taiping army gathered up all remaining valuables and set fire to the lot, including themselves. . . .

do), and the powers oppressing him are thus foiled. We derive a feeling of happiness and comfort from this, which turns into respect for the person who has committed suicide. Consequently, we respect only heroic suicides, which represent the triumph of righteousness over treachery. . . .

SZMUL ZYGIELBOJM (1895–1943)

Letter to the President and Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland

Szmul Zygielbojm was born in a village in what is now Poland, then part of the Russian empire. At the age of 10, he left school and began working in a factory. As a young man, he became involved in the Jewish labor movement, and in 1924 he was elected to the Central Committee of the Bund in 1924. When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Zygielbojm went to Warsaw to participate in the defense of the city. He volunteered to replace a woman who was also active in the labor movement as one of the 12 hostages the Nazi occupation demanded; the Nazis then made him a member of the Jewish Council, the Judenrat, which they had established in order to create the ghetto in Warsaw, a move that Zygielbojm opposed. Zygielbojm escaped from the country, and during the years 1940–1943, he traveled, trying to persuade the Allies of the Nazi threat to Polish Jews. Representatives of the English and American governments met in Bermuda on April 19, 1943, to discuss the situation of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, but did nothing. At the same time, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising broke out and was definitively suppressed by the Nazis; Ziegelbojm's wife and son were among the hundreds of thousands killed. Zygielbojm killed himself weeks later, on May 12, 1943, in protest against the Allied indifference to the evolving Holocaust.

Ziegelbojm's suicide note, dated the day before his death, takes the form of a letter to the Polish president Wladyslaw Raczkiewicz and the Polish prime minister Wladyslaw Sikorski. Ziegelbojm explains the reason for his action; it is a brief but poignant and powerful account of suicide as protest.

Source

Szmul Zygielbojm, "The Last Letter from Szmul Zygielbojm, The Bund Representative With the Polish National Council in Exile." Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority; online at http://yad-vashem.org.il/about_holocaust/documents/part2/doc154.html.

LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT AND PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

May 11, 1943

To His Excellency
The President of the Republic of Poland
Wladyslaw Raczkiewicz
Prime Minister
General Wladyslaw Sikorski

Mr. President,
Mr. Prime Minister,

I am taking the liberty of addressing to you, Sirs, these my last words, and through you to the Polish Government and the people of Poland, and to the governments and people of the Allies, and to the conscience of the whole world:

The latest news that has reached us from Poland makes it clear beyond any doubt that the Germans are now murdering the last remnants of the Jews in Poland with unbridled cruelty. Behind the walls of the ghetto the last act of this tragedy is now being played out.

The responsibility for the crime of the murder of the whole Jewish nationality in Poland rests first of all on those who are carrying it out, but indirectly it falls also upon the whole of humanity, on the peoples of the Allied nations and on their governments, who up to this day have not taken any real steps to halt this crime. By looking on passively upon this murder of defenseless millions — tortured children, women and men — they have become partners to the responsibility.

I am obliged to state that although the Polish Government contributed largely to the arousing of public opinion in the world, it still did not do enough. It did not do anything that was not routine, that might have been appropriate to the dimensions of the tragedy taking place in Poland.

Of close to 3.5 million Polish Jews and about 700,000 Jews who have been deported to Poland from other countries, there were, according to the official figures of the Bund transmitted by the Representative of the Government, only 300,000 still alive in April of this year. And the murder continues without end.

I cannot continue to live and to be silent while the remnants of Polish Jewry, whose representative I am, are being murdered. My comrades in the Warsaw ghetto fell with arms in their hands in the last heroic battle. I was not permitted to fall like them, together with them, but I belong with them, to their mass grave.

By my death, I wish to give expression to my most profound protest against the inaction in which the world watches and permits the destruction of the Jewish people.

I know that there is no great value to the life of a man, especially today. But since I did not succeed in achieving it in my lifetime, perhaps I shall be able by my death to contribute to the arousing from lethargy of those who could and must act in order that even now, perhaps at the last moment, the handful of Polish Jews who are still alive can be saved from certain destruction.

My life belongs to the Jewish people of Poland, and therefore I hand it over to them now. I yearn that the remnant that has remained of the millions of Polish Jews may live to see liberation

together with the Polish masses, and that it shall be permitted to breathe freely in Poland and in a world of freedom and socialistic justice, in compensation for the inhuman suffering and torture inflicted on them. And I believe that such a Poland will arise and such a world will come about. I am certain that the President and the Prime Minister will send out these words of mine to all those to whom they are addressed, and that the Polish Government will embark immediately on diplomatic action and explanation of the situation, in order to save the living remnant of the Polish Jews from destruction.

I take leave of you with greetings, from everybody, and from everything that was dear to me and that I loved.

S. Zygielbojm

PAUL-LOUIS LANDSBERG (1901–1944)

from *The Moral Problem of Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Paul-Louis (also known as Paul-Ludwig) Landsberg was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1901 to a prominent family. Landsberg became a professor of philosophy at the University of Bonn in 1928. He wrote several works on anthropology and German philosophy, as well as Die Welt des Mittelalters und Wir *(c. 1922) (*The Medieval World and Us, The World of the Middle Ages*) when he was only 21. He left Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power and traveled first to France and Switzerland, before accepting a position in Barcelona, Spain, as professor of philosophy. Landsberg was forced to leave Spain again in 1936 because of the Civil War. He moved to France and began to write for the periodical* Esprit*—a publication associated with the "Personnaliste," or Personalist, movement. In 1940, he and his wife were placed in separate internment camps during the German occupation of France. Despite his experiences, he chose to remain in France to support the liberation effort and to aid his wife, who had suffered a nervous breakdown while incarcerated. During this time, Landsberg carried a poison that he intended to use on himself if captured by the Gestapo. He was arrested by German officers in 1943, but he had apparently changed his mind about suicide and had destroyed the poison. He died of exhaustion at a camp in Oranienburg, Germany, in April of 1944.*

Landsberg's philosophy was characterized by a fundamental concern with the nature of human beings and the connections between the body and the soul. He particularly emphasized the importance of the body in relationship with the soul, stressing the need to avoid a complete "abstraction" of the human person as primarily a soul tied to a physical frame. With this complex approach to the human condition, Landsberg addressed the ethical question of self-killing in The Moral Problem of Suicide *(published posthumously in French in 1951). In this long essay, excerpted here, Landsberg discusses historical arguments for and against suicide, specifically those associated with Christianity, many of which he finds simplistic. He argues that the issue of suicide is too complex to simply make a universal decree that is applicable to all people and situations. Having found the views of the Church fathers*

unconvincing, despite his own religious convictions, Landsberg offers his own unique interpretation of suicide and the states of mind leading to it; he sees it as the temptation to complete freedom, a freedom that is often opposed to duty. What is most missing from these early accounts is an example; he finds it in Jesus Christ. Landsberg argues that life is, of necessity, filled with suffering; suffering serves as a purifying process. Happiness is not the goal of life; and the mere prolongation of bodily existence is not of value. A total prohibition of suicide can only be justified because of the "scandal and paradox of the cross": "live and suffer." By "paradox," Landsberg alludes to the perspective of pagan philosophies like Stoicism, which could not understand the Christians' preference for martyrdom over suicide; he also considers the ways in which Buddhism's view, though averse to suicide, is deeply different from the Christian view. Suicide, on Landsberg's view, is unjustified because to throw away one's life is to throw away one's suffering, through which the meaning of life is achieved and made evident.

Source

Paul-Louis Landsberg, *The Experience of Death and The Moral Problem of Suicide*, tr. Cynthia Rowland (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), pp. 65–97.

from THE MORAL PROBLEM OF SUICIDE

. . . We all that know that Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular, and all moral theologies, whether Catholic or Protestant, consider suicide to be moral sin, and do not admit that it can be justified in any circumstances whatsoever. All this is quite clear, and there seems nothing more to be said. . . . [I]n my case, there seem to be two particular reasons which indeed make the question of suicide a very real problem, which neither Christian philosophy nor theology has the right to overlook.

1. . . . [O]f all existing moralities, Christian morality is strictly speaking the only one to forbid suicide outright, without being willing to allow any exceptions. There are, it is true, some philosophers, particularly Plato and the Platonists, who share a certain aversion to suicide. But we have no example of a non-Christian philosopher who considers it to be in every case a grave sin or crime. . . . The sacred horror of suicide is a peculiarly and exclusively Christian phenomenon.
2. From the philosophic angle, there is always a moral problem wherever there is a temptation latent in human nature itself. It should be enough to point out that cases of suicide have occurred at all times and amongst all peoples. . . .

And further, the very way in which the Christian religion opposes suicide by stigmatizing it as an extreme aberration, presumes the existence of such a temptation. But above all, we need only to have lived and to have understood only a little of the human heart, to know that man can welcome the idea of death. . . . And as soon as there is temptation we have to protect ourselves, and this self-protection must have a positive meaning which can even serve to make our morality deeper and more conscious. The great temptations are active forces which are necessary to the moral evolution of an extremely imperfect creature that is nevertheless destined to perfection, that is to say, to man. It is not sufficient to point purely and simply to a divine command when humanity is challenged by one of its specific and, so to say, basic temptations. Man has to

respond with his whole being, with the full weight of his existence, in action, in feeling and also in his intellect. All serious moral philosophy is the theoretical expression of the outcome of such a struggle against temptation latent in the human condition.

In view of this, perhaps I shall be allowed to affirm the existence of an authentic problem and of the philosopher's right to discuss it. . . . We often find an argument against suicide, which is commonly put forward by the unintelligent. It is very customary to find all suicides condemned as cowards. This is a typically bourgeois argument which I find ridiculous. How can we describe as cowardly the way of dying chosen by Cato, or Hannibal, or Brutus, or Mithridates, or Seneca or Napoleon? There are certainly far more people who do not kill themselves because they are too cowardly to do so, than those who kill themselves out of cowardice. The argument can only be valid on an entirely different level. It may be that compared with the *supernatural* courage of Christ and the saints, even the courage of Cato might appear a form of cowardice. But on an ordinary human level it is more frequently the courageous who, in certain circumstances, decide to kill themselves. . . . [T]here is no weight in the argument that suicide is always proof of a weakness of will. There is a will to live and a will to die, and the latter has to be extremely powerful before it leads to suicide.

And then there are those, on the other hand, who still support the right to a voluntary choice of death by countering the Christians argument as follows: You say that voluntary death is contrary to the will of God who created us. But if this is true, then why did God create us in such a way that we have the capacity and opportunity to kill ourselves? This argument is all too easy to refute, but perhaps it is more important to learn from it. . . . Every crime and sin is in a sense possible to man and the same argument could be used to justify murder and robbery. The whole significance of a moral prohibition is that it is there to guide a man who has the capacity to act otherwise. . . . Temptation is an experience of the difference between the vertigo of power and the decision of duty. . . . The temptation to suicide is part of the vertigo of his dangerous liberty. If, therefore, the fact of being able to kill oneself is not a justification for suicide, it is nevertheless the basis of a specifically human problem. For the temptation to fathom the full extent of his freedom is one of the profoundest temptations known to man.

It is therefore not surprising that philosophic discussion of the problem has always centred on the problem of liberty. I have no room to do justice to the quality of this discussion. It is no exaggeration to say that the problem of free choice of death is one of the fundamental problems of all the great moral philosophies. All I can do here is to review briefly the stoic point of view, which is particularly important and well-developed. . . . Stoic wisdom did not necessarily entail death, but it depended on a frame of mind in which the whole person has become the free arbiter of his own "living or dying" according to the dictates of reason. The stoic was a man who could die if reason so ordained. The empirical capacity to die which is common to all human beings was transformed in the Stoic into a capacity which could function immediately if fate required it of reason. It is not the external act of suicide which is glorified, but rather the inner liberty which permits and insists on it, in certain cases. In such circumstances suicide is the *via libertatis*. Then the voice of Seneca says to man: "You should not live in necessity, since there is no necessity to live.". . . Stoicism has never completely died out and the conflict between Christianity and stoic morality has continued to disturb the conscience of Europe, particularly since the Renaissance. . . . [I]t is a philosophy of the autonomy of the reasonable being, the keystone of which is the philosophy of a free choice of death.

It is understandable that the struggle with stoicism should have led the Christian Church to give explicit reasons for its indemnation of self-inflicted death. . . . I believe, however, that the

early Christians did not discuss the problem, simply because they considered it had been solved for them by the example of Christ and the martyrs. . . .

It seems only fair, however, to put forward my own definition of suicide: . . . the act by which a human being deliberately creates what he considers to be an effective and adequate cause of his own death. The theorists who look at Christianity from outside may, in fact, be easily led astray by the almost total contempt for empirical existence displayed by the martyrs. This fact is important, since it demonstrates once again that Christianity has not been led to condemn suicide from any attachment to earthly life or from any particularly exalted view of its value. In the story of the martyrdom of St. Peter, for instance, we find contempt for death and empirical existence which is inspired by Christ's example. "My brethren, my children, we must not flee suffering, for Christ's sake, since He Himself of His own free will, accepted death for our sake.". . . But this is far from justifying the fantastic idea which tries to make of Christ a type of suicide. To kill oneself to avoid the cross and to suffer martyrdom on the cross are not exactly the same thing. We should be quite clear that nothing was further from the minds of the early Christians than to condemn a self-inflicted death in the name of any loyalty to our empirical existence. The contempt for earthly life amongst early Christians was so extreme that to modern eyes it might sometimes seem even monstrous. Take, as an example, a passage from the epistle to the Romans of Ignatius the martyr: "Let me be fodder for the beasts. . . . I am the corn of God; I must be ground in the jaws of beasts. . . . I hope to meet wild beasts of a suitable disposition and, if necessary, I shall caress them, so that they may devour me immediately." Those who turn Christianity into a sort of virtuous optimism proper to all decent people, will never understand the attitude of true Christians to death, neither, as we shall see, will they understand the deeper reason underlying the Christian rejection of self-inflicted death. The magistrate who said to Dionysius the martyr, "it is good to live," received the reply, "Far other is the light we seek." Modern man is not superior, but definitely inferior to the Stoics. He has to be reminded that Christianity also condemns all forms of euthanasia, which must indeed be scandalous and hideously paradoxical to all but the heroic cast of mind.

But to return to St. Augustine, who was led to discuss the problem in his arguments with the Donatists, a Christian and belligerent sect which admitted suicide; and above all in his struggle with the Stoics. His admirable text, which is the foundation of all Christian philosophy on this subject, can be found in the first chapter of the *Civitas Dei*. You will remember the events which gave rise to the book: Rome the Eternal City, The City, in short, the holy capital of civilization and the Empire, had fallen for the first time in 410, to the barbarian invader. She had been partially destroyed and terribly ravaged by Alaric. The Bishop of Hippo, the apologist of the Church, wrote his great work in order to prove that Christianity was not the cause of this shattering event, and that the fall of Rome was far from implying the fall of the religion which, since Constantine, had been to some extent the Roman religion. So he was compelled to tackle the stoic philosophy from the Christian point of view, since Stoicism had remained to a large degree the philosophy of the Roman nobility, and was apparently being used as the philosophical basis of the argument that Christianity and its slave morality had been responsible for the decadence of Rome. Christian women were, in particular, reproached for not having killed themselves rather then fall into the hands of the barbarians, which inevitably implied the loss of their virginity. St. Augustine replies first of all that the essence of virginity is not a physical state but a moral fact. It can be lost morally without being lost physically but, what is still more important, when a woman loses her physical virginity without any consent of the will, as in the case of the

women raped during the sack of Rome, she does not lose her moral virginity; she is innocent and not dishonoured and therefore has no reason to kill herself.

When discussing the classic instance of Lucrece, St. Augustine insists on the spiritual morality of Christians. But in the main he counters the stoic argument with the assertion that suicide is always and everywhere a crime. The arguments he uses reappear again and again in Christian literature down to our own days. The principal argument is as follows; to kill oneself is to kill a man, therefore suicide is homicide. Homicide is inexcusable and is forbidden in the Ten Commandments. With all respect, I hardly feel that the argument is adequate. The commandment cannot and should not be interpreted to cover every act which involves as a deliberate consequence the death of a man. The Christian tradition, apart from a few sects, has always allowed two important exceptions: war and capital punishment. . . . [T]he moment we begin to make moral distinctions between the different types of cases which may involve the death of a man, one may just as well make a distinction between suicide and the murder of someone else. In my opinion, it is even necessary to do so. In the first place, if we are deciding something which affects our own life, we are in a totally different position from deciding something which affects the life of another. What would be an act of violent hostility towards another cannot be the same towards ourselves, if it is we who decide on the act. In many cases, the man who kills himself has no intention of destroying his person, but rather of saving it. Rarely, if ever, does he aim at annihilation. There is a smack of sophistry about this moral identification of the two acts when their dissimilarity is so striking. As for the commandment, we must not make it say what it does not say. It is universally accepted that it does not forbid a just war or the death penalty, but it is difficult to maintain that it does condemn suicide, at any rate unconditionally. The Old Testament records as many suicides as it does wars, and some of them are glorified, as in the cases of Samson and Saul. Christians have made out, in the case of these biblical suicides, that a direct and exceptional command from god may hallow acts which are quite immoral in themselves. This is the paradox taken up by Kierkegaard, of Abraham who is prepared, in faith and obedience, to become the murderer of his son. It is Calvin's justification of political sedition when ordained by God. However, the Old Testament chronicles its suicides without insisting on any such supernatural justification. There is no reason for believing that the Decalogue was intended to cover cases of suicide. And the chain of reasoning which plays such a large part in Augustine's text, is certainly not an example of his profoundest thinking.

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. . . St. Thomas is not satisfied with St. Augustine's arguments and tries to substitute others. The fresh arguments that he adduces are three:

1. Suicide is contrary to man's natural inclinations, contrary to natural law and contrary to charity—to that charity which a man owes to himself. . . . I must admit I find it difficult to see that something can be against natural law when it is practiced, accepted and often honoured amongst all non-Christian peoples. Suicide is far from being contrary to human nature. The human animal's will to live is neither unlimited nor unconditional. It remains to be seen whether suicide must, in every case, be contrary to the love we should have for ourselves. Suicide, no doubt, deprives us of that good which is life. But in fact, and from the Christian's point of view, this good is of highly dubious quality; and, in any case, it is not the highest good and often rather more like an evil. To deprive oneself of a purely relative good to avoid an evil which is expected to be greater, such as the loss of honour or freedom,

is not an act directed against oneself. And this is very often precisely the case of the man who kills himself. It would be much more reasonable to say that he kills himself out of too great self-love. . . . In the majority of cases, the one who kills himself seeks neither perdition nor extinction; the life he knows seems less desirable than something which is vague and unknown, but at any rate something. The theological sin of despair is not defined as to the loss of such and such an empirical expectation, but as the loss of that fundamental hope in God and His goodness which is the very life of the human heart. The loss of expectation is even a necessary step in the spiritual journey of the masters. It is therefore false to claim that all suicides are men without hope, in the theological sense. Personally, I go so far as to believe that man never despairs completely, that it is impossible for him and contrary to his essential being, to despair. . . . The act of suicide does not, to me, express despair, but rather a wild and misguided hope directed to the vast unknown kingdom on the other side of death. I would even venture on the paradox: men often kill themselves because they cannot and will not despair. . . .

2. St. Thomas repeats the argument used by the platonic school, and particularly Aristotle, to discountenance suicide. Plato was, in fact, somewhat opposed to the idea of suicide for reasons not unrelated to the enormous influence of the orphic mysteries on the spirit of his philosophy, and also because of his profound attachment to the idea of the *Polis*; one has only to read Diogenes Laertius to appreciate that suicide was almost the normal end of all Greek philosophers from Empedocles down to the Hellenistic period. But Plato gives the philosophers a place in the City and advises them not to desert this place. Aristotle turns it into the argument that a man belongs to his country and to society and has no right to deprive them of his presence and activity by suicide. St. Thomas takes up this argument which would, perhaps, have a certain value in an ideal society; but, in reality, people often kill themselves because the very imperfect societies in which they are condemned to live prevent them from leading any form of creative life. So long as societies breed more forms of moral and material misery than need be our lot, it would be highly imprudent to authorise them to condemn those who try to escape from their authority by death. Man did not ask to be born into a society and he does not see why he should not be allowed to leave it by the best door left open, if life in such a society has lost all meaning for him. The argument may be valid in certain cases, where someone may in fact be abandoning an important social duty, but it is clearly inadequate as a general argument against suicide as such. Moreover, the same collectivist premise might lead to the opposite conclusion if an individual could no longer find a social justification for his existence. . . . St. Thomas is taking up one of Aristotle's arguments, as he often does, without allowing for the profoundly non-Christian outlook which inspires his thinking both in detail and in the whole. The weakness of the social argument can be seen even more clearly in Kant. According to Kant, the man who feels tempted to commit suicide should consider whether the principle on which his decision is based could become a principle of general legislation. But man knows very well that he is faced every time with a particular situation, and that he is, as a person, unique. In modern Christian moralists the argument reappears in the form that man has no right to kill himself since this would constitute a crime against his family. But as a general argument, this also fails to convince. First of all, a lot of people have no families, or a shattered or detestable family, and secondly, the question is really far too personal to be decided by such arguments. Everyone dies sooner or later, and society and the family get over it. . . . One of the most frequent types of suicide

is the result of a love affair, often in the form of a suicide pact. It would be ridiculous to try to say to these unhappy creatures that they are proposing to commit a mortal sin because they are neglecting their duty towards their family. Why does no one say the same thing to the young people who go into monasteries, often against the wishes of the family? This is another of those arguments—not St. Thomas's argument, but that of one's duty to the family—which reek of complacency. Suicide is often taken to be an act indicative of decadent and anarchistic individualism, overlooking the fact that amongst entirely healthy and even extremely warlike communities it is often considered, in certain circumstances, a social duty. But death is above all so much a personal and individual thing that the problems it creates transcend the social life of this planet.

3. By far the most weighty of St. Thomas's arguments is the third: we are God's property, just as the slave is the property of his master. Man is not *sui juris*. It is for God to decide on our life or death.

Leaving aside the comparison with the slave, which invites the stoic reply that it is precisely the free man who can kill himself, there is undoubtedly something strong and cogent in this argument. Suicide may be due to pride. Man can now prove that he can be *sicut Deus*. Montaigne has replied in defense of the stoic point of view: "God has given us leave enough when He puts us in such a state that living is worse than dying." The Thomist argument loses much of its value unless it is taken in a specifically Christian sense. If we were dealing with a God who was a tyrant and slave owner, the argument would clearly not suffice.

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. . . To understand why Christianity is opposed to suicide, we must recall the fundamental character of Christian life which is, in all its forms, an attempt at the imitation of Jesus Christ.

This effort implies a radical conversion of natural human attitudes, more especially with regard to suffering. The human being has, by nature, a horror of suffering and a desire for happiness. The man who kills himself almost always does so to escape from the suffering of this life towards an unknown happiness and calm. In any case he says in his heart, "I want to go somewhere else. I do not wish to endure this suffering which has no meaning and is beyond my strength."

It is here that the spirit of Christianity intervenes with its tremendous paradox. Yes, live and suffer. You should not be surprised that you suffer. If happiness were the meaning of life, it would indeed be a revolting and finally improbable condition. But the situation is different if life is a justification, the progress towards a transcendent goal, and if its meaning were in fact evident in suffering and achieved through suffering. "Lord, to suffer or to die," prays St. Theresa. Yes, in spite of all those optimistic believers, life is the carrying of a cross. But even the cross has a sacred meaning.

My belief is, therefore, that far from being one of the so-called natural laws, or the law of some peculiar common sense, the total prohibition of suicide can only be justified or even understood in relation to the scandal and the paradox of the Cross. It is true that we belong to God, as Christ belonged to God. It is true that we should subordinate our will to His, as Christ did. It is true that we should leave the decision as to our life or death to Him. If we wish to die, we have indeed the right to pray to God to let us die. Yet we must always add: Thy will, not mine, be done. But this God is not our master as if we were slaves. He is our Father. He is the Christian God who loves us with infinite love and infinite wisdom. If He makes us suffer, it is for our salvation and purification. We must recall the spirit in which Christ suffered the most horrible death. In

certain circumstances, to refuse suicide is far from natural. To prefer martyrdom to suicide is a paradox peculiar to the Christian. It was precisely this element in the martyr's attitude which so profoundly shocked the pagan philosophers. The martyrs refused suicide, not through a cowardly attachment to life, but because they found a strange happiness in following the example of Christ, and suffering for Him and with Him. It has been quite reasonably maintained that the fact that people are willing to die for a cause argues nothing as to the value of that cause. It is true that a great many persons have died for causes which we find deplorable. So it is in a different sense that the martyrs bear witness to Christianity. They do not prove any given theoretical truth, but they prove by their example that it is possible to live and die in a Christian manner. It is not their death, but their manner of dying which is important. They are witness in a very special way to the fact that Grace may enable a man to follow Christ in His attitude towards suffering and death, which is itself very far from natural. Their blessedness in, and to some extent through, suffering, far exceeds the somewhat frigid heroism of the ancient world. The vast majority of humanity is morally inferior to the Stoics. The Christian martyr is superior. The stoic virtue is perhaps the highest morality known to man outside the sphere of Christian Grace. The hero, master of his own death, stands above the mass of poltroons and slaves. "This noble despair, so worthy of the Romans," wrote Corneille. The saint is, as it were a super-hero of specifically Christian character. It is his life that in fact demonstrates the argument. He shows that it is possible for man to live out his suffering by discovering a transcendental significance in its very depths. One cannot stress too strongly the paradoxical quality of all this, just as Kierkegaard has so rightly insisted on the paradoxical nature of the whole of Christianity. In order to gauge the paradox, we should remember what suffering is. The word is quickly said, but the subject itself is vast, an authentic mystery. Even physical suffering can take on horrible forms. We are told that it will be limited and that consciousness, the precondition of suffering, fails at a certain level of pain. Perhaps: we know little about it. Man is always mistaken when he thinks he has reached the ultimate limit of human suffering. There are still the worst moral tortures. One falls, one falls from abyss to abyss. In periods like our own, one must feel frightened at the immensity of present human suffering. When one reads history, one is overwhelmed by what men have always and everywhere endured. Sickness, death, misery and all manner of peril, surround the human being. The optimists are having a joke at our expense. It is no exaggeration to speak, as Schopenhauer does, of a *ruchloser optimismus*, a frivolous and criminal optimism.

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There is no doubt that there is no justice here below. Criminal monsters carry all before them, and none suffers more then the saint. Here we approach the mystery of sin, which is so closely linked with this other mystery that the Christian finds the meaning of life in and through suffering. Man, we said, was a creature who could kill himself and should not do so. The meaning of this assertion now becomes clearer. The temptation exists, and there is rejection of this temptation. Where this rejection is authentically Christian, it is in the form of an act of love towards God, and towards suffering, not as suffering, which is impossible—algophilia is pathological, and even Christ faltered before His last agony, and prayed that it should be taken from Him—but towards suffering in so far as it contains a remedy desired by God.

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Before drawing to a close, I should briefly mention one argument against the Christian point of view. If suffering is sacred and contains the meaning of life, why are we entitled to struggle against it? If we have this right, and even this duty, why should we not have the right

to withdraw from suffering by suicide, if there is no other way out? I agree at once that man has the right to struggle against the miseries of existence. The contrary would obviously lead to moral absurdities, such as the immorality of medicine. But we should not overestimate the struggle, neither in its importance nor in its chances of success. It is natural and laudable for man to struggle against sickness, cruelty, misery and the rest. But in point of fact there has been no progress in human happiness in all our history, but rather the reverse. Everything we know leads us to believe that the so-called primitive peoples are much happier than we are. What is false is not the struggle against suffering, but the illusion that we can destroy it. The means of fighting this suffering is, above all, work, which was given to man both as punishment and cure. But this effort to combat suffering cannot be compared with the act of suicide. Suicide is something on its own. It seems to me to be a flight by which man hopes to recover Paradise Lost instead of trying to deserve Heaven. The desire for death which is unleashed when temptation becomes our master is, psychologically speaking, the desire to regress to a pre-natal state. To disappear, to get away from it all. Stekel and others have given us a precise psychological analysis of suicide, the longing for the abyss, the mother, the return. The whole process could be described in Freudian terms. Theologically speaking, there is, in fact, the vague illusion of a return to Paradise. The Rousseau-Werther type of suicide is usually conscious of this obscure motivation. In this connection one could quote many interesting passages from Goethe, Sénancourt, Amiel, and others. But Christ guides us through struggle and suffering towards a brighter light. The god, or rather, goddess, of suicide thrusts us back upon the mother's breast. In this sense, suicide is an infantilism. It is this quality of regression which prevents any comparison between suicide and man's normal struggle against suffering. It is the failure of all other means which, in the majority of cases, leads to suicide; it is the universal experience of powerlessness. This convergence of one disaster after the other, destroying all possibility of living and struggling, is the common factor in the biographies of all suicides. Without going into the details of some personal biographies I have myself studied, let me remind you of two great classics: *Werther* and *Anna Karenina*. You can see in these two books how life and his own character combine to form a trap for man. And it is precisely what is most noble in man that may urge him to suicide. If you can imagine a Werther or an Anna Karenina who were both slightly more frivolous, you will see that their problems might have been solved. But you will see also that in such cases the only truly positive and honourable solution would be that complete conversion required by Christ.

. . . It is therefore useful, by dwelling on one specific problem, to show that Christian morality is not some sort of natural, reasonable and universal morality, with perhaps a little more sensation in it than some others, but the manifestation in life of a paradoxical revelation. It cannot be superfluous, either, to remind oneself to-day that Christian morality is not a morality of compromise, but that it requires a heroism more profound, more absurd and, in a way, more intransigent, than any other. In other words, we have to become explicitly conscious of things which in an age still close to the martyrs could be taken for granted.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906–1945)

from *Ethics: The Last Things and the Things Before the Last* (expanded in Archive)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian, was born in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland), the son of a famous psychiatrist. From 1923 to 1927, Bonhoeffer studied theology at the universities of Berlin and Tübingen. He also studied under Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he attended and taught at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, developing a love of Negro spirituals and an acute interest in racial justice. Bonhoeffer's doctoral thesis and early writings sought to explain Christian theology in light of contemporary philosophy and sociology. He was an early opponent of anti-Semitism and the Nazi regime, and became involved in the Confessing Church, the center of German Protestant resistance to the nazification of the churches. Through his leadership and his books, Gemeinsames Leben *(1939; trans.* Life Together, *1954) and* Nachfolge *(1937; trans.* The Cost of Discipleship, *1948), Bonhoeffer instituted rigorous practices of private confession, prayer, and discipline while attacking the laxity of popular Protestantism. Bonhoeffer focused on creating a church capable of withstanding National Socialism and its theological proponents.*

As early as 1933, Bonhoeffer and his family were persuaded that Hitler's government was illegitimate and the the church should stand up against the state. He favored killing Hitler, not as an assassination, but as tyrannicide. Bonhoeffer became involved with the Abwehr in 1940 where his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, worked; in that capacity he was able to use his ecumenical connections to carry messages abroad for the German resistance.

From 1940–43, he wrote fragments of his theological volume Ethik *(1949; trans.* Ethics, *1955). Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and hanged just before the end of the war in 1945. Published posthumously, his* Widerstand und Ergebung *(1951, trans.* Prisoner of God: Letters and Papers from Prison, *1953) expresses his profound belief in the maturity of the Christian individual and the worldly groundedness of true Christianity.*

In the selections from Ethics, *written at the time of the Nazi "euthanasia" killings, Bonhoeffer argues that the possibility of suicide is an indication of human freedom over life: we are free to make this choice, and it can be seen as "a man's attempt to give a final human meaning to a life which has become humanly meaningless." However, God alone possesses rights over life, and God's existence is the only relevant rationale for the inappropriateness of suicide. In individual cases, bodily self-sacrifice is not considered self-murder if the intentions are altruistic. But suicide is in general wrong, something lack of faith may disguise, since it "conceals from a man the fact that even suicide cannot release him from the hand of God. . . ." Suicide, Bonhoeffer wrote (one cannot know whether at the time he could foresee his arrest, internment, and hanging at the hands of the Nazis), is the "hardest of all temptations."*

Source

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 155–156, 162, 166–172. Material in introduction from Victoria J. Barnett.

from ETHICS: THE LAST THINGS AND THE THINGS BEFORE THE LAST

The Right to Bodily Life

Bodily life, which we receive without any action on our own part, carries within itself the right to its own preservation. . . . Since it is God's will that there should be human life on earth only in the form of bodily life, it follows that it is for the sake of the whole man that the body possesses the right to be preserved. And since all rights are extinguished at death, it follows that the preservation of the life of the body is the foundation of all natural rights without exception and is, therefore, invested with a particular importance. The underlying right of natural life is the safeguarding of nature against intentional injury, violation and killing. . . .

But let us now consider the case when an incurably diseased person in full possession of his senses gives his assent to the termination of his life, and indeed asks for it. Can a wish of this kind carry with it a valid demand for the application of euthanasia? Undoubtedly one cannot speak of a valid demand so long as the patient's life still raises demands on its own account, in other words so long as the doctor is under an obligation not only towards the will but also towards the actual life of the patient. The question of destroying the life of another is now replaced by the question of the admissibility of terminating one's own life in a case of extremely severe illness, or of assisting in so doing. . . .

Our conclusion must, therefore, be that consideration for the healthy also establishes no right to the deliberate destruction of innocent life, and from this it follows that the question regarding euthanasia must be answered in the negative. The Bible sums up this judgement in the sentence: 'The innocent . . . slay thou not' (Ex. 23:7).

Suicide

Man, unlike the beasts, does not carry his life as a compulsion which he cannot throw off. He is free either to accept his life or to destroy it. Unlike the beasts man can put himself to death of his own free will. An animal is one with the life of its body, but man can distinguish himself from the life of his body. The freedom in which man possesses his bodily life requires him to accept this life freely, and at the same time it directs his attention to what lies beyond this bodily life and impels him to regard the life of his body as a gift that is to be preserved and as a sacrifice that is to be offered. Only because a man is free to choose death can he lay down the life of his body for the sake of some higher good. Without freedom to sacrifice one's life in death, there can be no freedom towards God, there can be no human life.

In his liberty to die, man is given a unique power which can easily lead to abuse. Man can indeed by its means become the master of his earthly destiny, for he can by his own free decision seek death in order to avoid defeat and he may thus rob fate of its victory. . . . Suicide is a specifically human action, and it is not surprising if it has on this account repeatedly been applauded and justified by noble human minds. If this action is performed in freedom it is raised high above any petty moralizing accusation of cowardice and weakness. Suicide is the ultimate and extreme self-justification of man as man, and it is therefore, from the purely human standpoint, in a certain sense even the self-accomplished expiation for a life that has failed. This deed will usually take place in a state of despair, yet it is not the despair itself

that is the actual originator of suicide, but rather a man's freedom to perform his supreme act of self-justification even in the midst of this despair. If a man cannot justify himself in his happiness and his success, he can still justify himself in his despair. If he cannot make good his right to a human life in the life of his body, he can still do so by destroying his body. If he cannot compel the world to acknowledge his right, yet he can still assert this right, himself, in his last solitude. Suicide is a man's attempt to give a final human meaning to a life which has become humanly meaningless. . . .

If suicide must nevertheless be declared wrongful, it is to be arraigned not before the forum of mortality or of men but solely before the forum of God. A man who takes his own life incurs guilt solely towards God, the Maker and Master of his life. It is because there is a living God that suicide is wrongful as a sin of lack of faith. Lack of faith is not a moral fault, for it is compatible with both noble and base motives and actions, but, both in good and in evil, lack of faith takes no account of the living God. That is the sin. It is through lack of faith that a man seeks his own justification, and has recourse to suicide as the last possible means of his own justification, because he does not believe in a divine justification. Lack of faith is disastrous in that it conceals from a man the fact that even suicide cannot release him from the hand of God, who has prepared his destiny for him. Lack of faith does not perceive, beyond the gift of bodily life, the Creator and Lord who alone has the right to dispose of His creation. . . .

God has reserved to Himself the right to determine the end of life, because He alone knows the goal to which it is His will to lead it. It is for Him alone to justify a life or to cast it away. Before God self-justification is quite simply sin, and suicide is therefore also sin. There is no other cogent reason for the wrongfulness of suicide, but only the fact that over men there is a God. Suicide implies denial of this fact.

It is not the baseness of the motive that makes suicide wrongful. One may remain alive for base motives, and one may give up one's life for noble motives. . . . The community may impose penalties on suicide, but it will not be able to convince the offender himself that it possesses a valid right over his life. Insufficient, too, is the argument which is widely used in the Christian Church to the effect that suicide rules out the possibility of repentance and, therefore, also of forgiveness. Many Christians have died sudden deaths without having repented of all their sins. This is setting too much store by the last moment of life. . . .

God, the Creator and Lord of life, Himself exercises the right over life. . . . It is a remarkable fact that the Bible nowhere expressly forbids suicide, but that suicide appears there very often. . . . The reason for this is not that the Bible sanctions suicide, but that, instead of prohibiting it, it desires to call the despairing to repentance and to mercy. A man who is on the brink of suicide no longer has ears for commands or prohibitions; all he can hear now is God's merciful summons to faith, to deliverance and to conversion. . . . A man who can no longer live is not helped by any command that he should live, but only by a new spirit.

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Far more difficult than the determining of this general principle is the judgement of particular cases. Since suicide is an act of solitude, the ultimate decisive motives almost always remain hidden. Even when some outward catastrophe in life has gone before, the deepest inward reason for the deed is still concealed from the eye of the stranger. . . . It is only if the action is undertaken exclusively and consciously out of consideration for one's own person that self-killing becomes self-murder. But who would venture to assess with certainty the degree of consciousness and exclusiveness of such a motive? If a prisoner takes his life for fear that under

torture he might betray his country, his family or his friend, of if the enemy threaten reprisals unless a certain statesman is surrendered to them and it is only by his own free death that this statesman can spare his country grievous harm, then the self-killing is so strongly subject to the motive of sacrifice that it will be impossible to condemn the deed. If a sufferer from incurable disease cannot fail to see that his care must bring about the material and psychological ruin of his family, and if he therefore by his own decision frees them from this burden, then no doubt there are many objections to such an unauthorized action, and yet here, too, a condemnation will be impossible. In view of such cases as these the prohibition of suicide can scarcely be made absolute to the exclusion of the freedom of sacrificing one's life. . . . Clearly the case is different if suicide is motivated by purely personal matters such as wounded honour, erotic passion, financial ruin, gambling debts or serious personal lapses, in other words if a man kills himself not in order to protect the lives of others but solely in order that his own life may be justified. . . .

But quite apart from all external motivations there is a temptation to suicide to which the believer is especially exposed, a temptation to abuse the freedom which is given by God by turning it against his own life. Hatred for the imperfection of his own life, experience of the headstrong resistance which earthly life in general opposes to its own fulfillment by God, the grief which arises from this and the doubt as to whether life has any meaning at all, all these may lead him into great danger. . . . It is not the right to life that can overcome this temptation to suicide, but only the grace which allows a man to continue to live in the knowledge of God's forgiveness. But who would venture to say that God's grace and mercy cannot embrace and sustain even a man's failure to resist this hardest of all temptations?

ALBERT CAMUS (1913–1960)

from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (expanded in Archive)
from *Notebooks 1935–1951* (in Archive only)

The central philosophical concern probed by Albert Camus, novelist, essayist, and playwright, was the problem of finding meaning and value in an absurd world, the basic human issue of the philosophical school known as Existentialism. Camus was born into poverty in Mondovi, Algeria, but was able to attend the University of Algiers, where he was a keen student of philosophy. His academic career was cut short by one of his severe periodic bouts of tuberculosis. After his recovery, Camus founded a theater group aimed toward working-class audiences and, in 1938, became a journalist with a newly founded anti-colonialist paper, the Alger-Républicain. *He moved to France during World War II and continued to work as a journalist. He also began to write fiction and soon gained recognition for his novel* The Stranger *(1942), a work he described as "the study of an absurd man in an absurd world." Other important works by Camus include* The Myth of Sisyphus *(1942), a long essay concerning*

the absurd; The Plague *(1947), a novel about the possibility of resisting the absurd through the assertion of human dignity and endurance; and* The Rebel *(1951), an essay concerning the idea of revolt. Camus received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 and died tragically in an automobile accident on Jan. 4, 1960.*

Camus's work focuses on the conflict between, on the one hand, death and the absurdity of mortality, and on the other hand, the world of justice, meaning, and moral order. In Camus's view, it could be argued that complete philosophical absurdism leads logically to moral indifference and even nihilism. Yet Camus's temperament and his experiences during the war provoked him to search for ethical value, moral responsibility, and a way to resist the seemingly meaningless cruelty of the absurd; human beings can engage in a "revolt" against the absurd in search of the virtues and ethical duty.

In the selection from The Myth of Sisyphus, *Camus discusses the philosophical question of whether human beings should even attempt this struggle or whether they may escape it through suicide (i.e., whether it makes any sense to go on living once the meaninglessness of human life is fully understood). The opening sentence of this essay is perhaps the most widely quoted line concerning suicide anywhere: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."*

The Notebooks, *Camus's literary diary, were not initially written for publication. They reflect among other things some of the themes of* Sisyphus, *and in the excerpts here focus particularly on the challenge that the possibility of suicide poses to Camus's sense of the finality of death and yet the importance of life.*

Sources

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1942), tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 3–8, 44–48; *Notebooks 1935–1951*, tr. Philip Thody (New York: Marlowe, 1998; combining two previously published volumes, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, Hamilton Ltd. and Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, and *Notebooks* 1942–1951, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp. 83, 94, 98, 107, 110, 111,114, 154, 175, 177, 203.

from THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

Absurdity and Suicide

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest —whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories —comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect. . . .

. . . What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling

of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.

The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action. Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct. It is legitimate to wonder, clearly and without false pathos, whether a conclusion of this importance requires forsaking as rapidly as possible an incomprehensible condition. I am speaking, of course, of men inclined to be in harmony with themselves.

. . . We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead. In short, the essence of that contradiction lies in what I shall call the act of eluding because it is both less and more than diversion in the Pascalian sense. Eluding is the invariable game. The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion that constitutes the third theme of this essay, is hope, Hope of another life one must "deserve" or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it.

Thus everything contributes to spreading confusion. Hitherto, and it has not been wasted effort, people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments. One merely has to refuse to be misled by the confusions, divorces, and inconsistencies previously pointed out. One must brush everything aside and go straight to the real problem. One kills oneself because life is not worth living, that is certainly a truth—yet an unfruitful one because it is a truism. But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has no meaning? Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide—this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest. Does the Absurd dictate death? This problem must be given priority over others, outside all methods of thought and all exercises of the disinterested mind. Shades of meaning, contradictions, the psychology that an "objective" mind can always introduce into all problems have no place in this pursuit and this passion. It calls simply for an unjust—in other words, logical—thought. That is not easy. It is always easy to be logical. It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end. Men who die by their own hand consequently follow to its conclusion their emotional inclination. Reflection on suicide gives me an opportunity to raise the only problem to interest me: is there a logic to the point of death? I cannot know unless I pursue, without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence, the reasoning of which I am here suggesting the source. This is what I call an absurd reasoning. Many have begun it. I do not yet know whether or not they kept to it. . . .

. . . Knowing whether or not one can live *without appeal* is all that interests me. I do not want to get out of my depth. This aspect of life being given me, can I adapt myself to it? Now, faced with this particular concern, belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality. If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living. It is not up to me to wonder if this is vulgar or revolting, elegant or deplorable. Once and for all, value judgments are discarded here in favor of factual judgments. I have merely to draw the

conclusions from what I can see and to risk nothing that is hypothetical. Supposing that living in this way were not honorable, then true propriety would command me to be dishonorable. . . .

. . . But again it is the absurd and its contradictory life that teaches us. For the mistake is thinking that that quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us. Here we have to be over-simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them. Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless. Let's be even more simple. Let us say that the sole obstacle, the sole deficiency to be made good, is constituted by premature death. Thus it is that no depth, no emotion, no passion, and no sacrifice could render equal in the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of forty years and a lucidity spread over sixty years. Madness and death are his irreparables. Man does not choose. The absurd and the extra life it involves *therefore do not depend on man's will*, but on its contrary, which is death. Weighing words carefully, it is altogether a question of luck. One just has to be able to consent to this. There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life and experience.

By what is an odd inconsistency in such an alert race, the Greeks claimed that those who died young were beloved of the gods. And that is true only if you are willing to believe that entering the ridiculous world of the gods is forever losing the purest of joys, which is feeling, and feeling on this earth. The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man. But the word "ideal" rings false in this connection. It is not even his vocation, but merely the third consequence of his reasoning. Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt.

Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide. I know, to be sure, the dull resonance that vibrates throughout these days. Yet I have but a word to say: that it is necessary. When Nietzsche writes: "it clearly seems that the chief thing in heaven and on earth is to obey at length and in a single direction: in the long run there results something for which it is worth the trouble of living on this earth as, for example, virtue, art, music, the dance, reason, the mind—something that transfigures, something delicate, mad, or divine," he elucidates the rule of a really distinguished code of ethics. But he also points the way of the absurd man. Obeying the flame is both the easiest and the hardest thing to do. However, it is good for man to judge himself occasionally. He is alone in being able to do so.

"Prayer," says Alain, "is when night descends over thought." "But the mind must meet the night," reply the mystics and the existentials. Yes, indeed, but not that night that is born under closed eyelids and through the mere will of man—dark, impenetrable night that the mind calls up in order to plunge into it. If it must encounter a night, let it be rather that of despair, which remains lucid—polar night, vigil of the mind, whence will arise perhaps that white an virginal brightness which outlines every object in the light of the intelligence. At that degree, equivalence encounters passionate understanding. Then it is no longer even a question of judging the existential leap. It resumes its place amid the age-old fresco of human attitudes. For the spectator, if he is conscious, that leap is still absurd. In so far as it thinks it solves the paradox, it reinstates it intact. On this score, it is stirring. On this score, everything resumes its place and the absurd world is reborn in all its splendor and diversity.

But it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single way of seeing, to go without contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces. The preceding merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live.

JAPANESE NAVAL SPECIAL ATTACK FORCE (KAMIKAZE CORPS) (b. 1920s, d. 1944–1945)

Kamikaze Diaries

Last Letters Home (expanded in Archive)

In October 1944, toward the end of World War II, as it was becoming clear to the Japanese command that American aircraft carriers massing at the mouth of Leyte Gulf represented a serious threat, the new commander of Japanese naval air forces in the Philippines, Vice-Admiral Takijiro Ohnishi, arrived in Luzon. Knowing that the Japanese air forces in the entire Philippines area had fewer than 100 planes still in operational condition and that naval forces were not adequate to resist the invasion, Admiral Ohnishi recognized that loss to the Americans would mean loss of the Philippines altogether and with it the end of any real possibility of defending Japan. "In my opinion," one of his senior staff officers later quoted him as saying, "there is only one way of assuring that our meager strength will be effective to a maximum degree. That is to organize suicide attack units composed of Zero fighters armed with 250-kilogram bombs, with each plane to crash-drive into an enemy carrier. . . . What do you think?"

This moment saw the birth of the Japan Naval Special Attack Force, the tokkotai, known as the Thunder Gods or Kamikaze Corps. "Body-crashing" (tai-atari) *tactics had been used in air-to-air combat against enemy bombers, and many pilots had urged the use of the same tactics against enemy carriers, but it was at this moment that the idea of the suicide attack, a strategy devised by Sub-lieutenant Shoichi Ota, began its official translation into reality. The idea was presented to the remaining 23 young men of the 201st Air Group, already reduced to a third of its original size, by the officer who had been their commander during training and who, it was said, "was as deeply attached to these men as a father to his children." The young pilots embraced Admiral Ohnishi's idea of crash-dive missions "in a frenzy of emotion and joy." The operation, shortly to be called* kamikaze *or "divine wind," began within days.*

As time went on, more planes were added and more pilots trained. Training lasted seven days: two days of take-off practice, two days of formation flying, and three days of approaching and attacking a target. Morale was said to be high in the kamikaze units, and pilots were said to have prayed for a direct hit. Within half a year, kamikaze tactics had proved so effective in damaging enemy surface

forces that the Japanese high command grew convinced that kamikaze strategies were the only way to halt the American advance. Midget submarines with one or two pilots were also used in kamikaze naval attacks beginning with Pearl Harbor, and kamikaze strikes eventually became the primary strategy for all the armed forces. The attacks continued even after it became evident that Japan could not win; Admiral Ohnishi insisted that his men would be doomed in conventional combat, and argued that "[i]t is important to a commander, as it is to his men, that death be not in vain. I believe that a broad perspective indicates the wisdom of crash-diving" and ordered the suicide operations to continue.

There was both loyal support and intense criticism of kamikaze tactics in Japan and abroad. Although it is often assumed that the pilots were willing volunteers, many critics have claimed that the young recruits were pressured into service, that they were threatened with being sent to the front if they refused, and that coercion was heightened by the use of alcohol and amphetamines. Most navy pilots were between 18 and 20 years of age and most army pilots between 18 and 24. There were about 3,000 "boy pilots"; many of these student soldiers were drawn from the cream of young intellectuals. They left diaries (an important cultural practice in Japan), essays, poems, and letters expressing their true feelings of anguish about the war and their role in it.

Some scholars of Japanese culture claim that the Bushido *tradition of samurai military culture [q.v., under Daidoji Yuzan] had always stressed readiness to die at any moment, and the kamikaze strategy would not have been seen as problematic. Further, these young men had been taught to believe that if they died heroically in battle, they would become gods, joining the guardian spirits of the nation at Yasukuni Shrine on Kudan Hill. One of the few kamikaze survivors, Hatsuho Naito, rescued when his final flight ended in a forced landing in a paddy field, wrote: "I do not believe that this so-called suicide mentality is unique to the Japanese. The spirit of self-sacrifice exists in all countries among all people, particularly among the young, who are innocent and free of cynicism when they are in a wartime life-or-death situation." Many other observers hold that the long Japanese tradition of voluntary death, an honorable act, regarded as owed to one's lord and preferable to living in shame, was what made the kamikaze program possible.*

*All in all, some 3,913 Japanese pilots, including both those in kamikaze planes and their escorts, were "expended" in the various theaters of the war, including the Philippine Islands, Formosa, and Okinawa. The "Last Letters Home" presented here, collected by Ichiro Ohmi during a four-and-a-half-year trip after the war to visit the homes of the kamikaze pilots, were the last ones written by these young men, shortly before their final special-attack missions. Among many other concerns, they embody Shinto conceptions of the importance of defending ancestors and family. Ohmi explained, "It must be borne in mind that for many hundreds of years while the code of the warrior (*Bushido*), which stressed as necessary a willingness to die at any moment, governed the conduct of the samurai, similar principles were concurrently adopted by merchants, farmers, and artisans, stressing the value of unquestioning loyalty to the Emperor, other superiors, and the people of Japan. Thus, the introduction of the kamikaze principle was not so shocking to these Japanese as it would be to their Western enemies. In addition, the belief that one continues to live, in close association with both the living and the dead, after death, generally causes their concept of death to be less final and unpleasant in its implications."*

Other observers saw the situation differently. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney assembled the diaries of tokkøtai *pilots from their families after the war; she sees in these writings, far more revealing than the expected "last letters home," evidence of the kamikaze pilots' "desperate struggles to find meaning in a fate they could not avoid [and that] bear no resemblance to those of anyone seeking martyrdom. This is so despite the Japanese government's sustained propaganda campaign to apotheosize those fallen soldiers into symbols of martyrdom for the imperial nation."*

The United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, on Nagasaki three days later, and Japan announced its surrender on Aug. 15. That night, Admiral Ohnishi committed hara-kiri. Alone, he disemboweled himself with a traditional Japanese sword but was unable to slit his own throat, and when he was discovered still conscious by his aide the next morning, he refused both medical aid and the second's traditional coup de grace. Captain Inoguchi, his senior staff officer who chronicled the history of the Kamikaze Corps and Admiral Ohnishi's role in developing it, wrote that "[i]t would be wrong to think that his suicide was merely an atonement for sin. I believe that his life was dedicated from the moment he organized the Kamikaze Corps. Thereupon he had resolved to take his own life, and would have carried out that resolve even if Japan had won the war. In imagination he must have ridden with every pilot of his command as each made his final special attack."

Sources

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KAMIKAZE DIARIES

The following are excerpts from the diary of Sasaki Hachiro, born in 1922, who was drafted as a student soldier from the Imperial University Tokyo in December 1943 and volunteered to be a tokkotai pilot of February 20, 1945. He died on his kamikaze mission less than three months later, April 14, 1945.

We entered Kamikochi and greeted the Hodaka mountain peaks in the morning. Leaves of larch and birch are reflecting the morning sun and it is like looking at a scroll painting. I found my absolute authority here. If man did not posses a political nature, I would not mind sacrificing my life for this absolute authority [beauty and nature]. (April 4, 1940). . . .

I prefer to think that "inevitability" is more important than "necessity." One must always strive for *stirb und werde!* ["die and become!" or growth through death]. I am truly grateful for being alive. . .We cannot detach ourselves from the present condition. It is *in Welt sein* [the presence in the universe] of Heidegger. . . The most important thing is the freedom of will, freedom of spirit, amidst the chaos at present. . . Blind obedience without free will is not an answer to our chaos. Chaos is not so simple as to be resolved by a Führer. (November 1, 1940)

Zwei Seelen wohnen ach in mein[em] Herz! (Ah, two souls. . .reside in my heart. . .!] After all I am just a human being. Sometimes my chest pounds with excitement when I think of the day I will fly into the sky. I trained my mind and body as hard as I could and am anxious for the day I can use them to their full capacity in fighting. I think my life and death belong to the

mission. Yet, at other times, I envy those science majors who remain at home [exempt from the draft]. Or, I think of those fellows who did not pass the draft examination as "having managed cleverly." . . . I feel like a fool to be proud of my fitness as a pilot. Those who skillfully escaped by not qualifying in the examination and took shelter in bookkeeping, engineering, and medical tasks must be the real clever ones. One of my souls looks to heaven, while the other is attracted to the earth. I wish to enter the Navy as soon as possible so that I can devote myself to the task. I hope that the days when I am tormented by stupid thoughts will pass quickly.

* * *

Born in Tokyo in 1922, Hayashi Tadao attended the prestigious Third Higher School in Kyoto and then the Imperial University of Kyoto; he was drafted as a student soldier in 1943. He became a Navy Air Force pilot, but was shot down by an American fighter plane that took off from an aircraft carrier he had sighted, two days after the Allied Forces had delivered the Potsdam Declaration to Japan.

Death is immoral and to live is absolutely moral.

(June 2, 1944)

I feel that I have to accept the fate of my generation to fight in the war and die. I call it "fate," since we have to go to the battlefield to die without being able to express our opinions, criticize and argue pros and cons of issues, and behave with principles, that is, after being deprived of my own agency. . . . To die in the war, to die at the demand of the nation—I have no intention whatsoever to praise it; it is a great tragedy.

(Oct. 12, 1941)

I do not avoid sacrifice. I do not refuse the sacrifice of my self. However, I cannot tolerate the reduction of the self to nothingness in the process. I cannot approve it. Martyrdom or sacrifice must be done at the height of self-realization. Sacrifice at the end of self-annihilation, the dissolving of the self to nothingness, has no meaning whatsoever.

(Jan. 3, 1944)

* * *

From a description by Kasuga Takeo, who had been drafted and assigned to look after the meals, laundry, room cleaning, and other daily tasks for the tokkotai pilots at the Tsuchiura Naval Air Base, on the night before their final flights. He was 86 years old when he wrote this letter, fifty years after the events.

At the hall where their farewell parties were held, the young student officers drank cold sake the night before their flight. Some gulped the sake in one swallow; others kept gulping down [a large amount]. The whole place turned to mayhem. Some broke hanging light bulbs with their swords. Some lifted chairs to break the windows and tore white tablecloths. A mixture of military songs and curses filled the air. While some shouted in rage, others cried aloud. It was their last night of life. They thought of their parents, their faces and images, lovers' faces and their smiles, a sad farewell to their fiancées—all went through their mind like a running-horse lantern [a rapidly revolving lantern with many pictures on it]. Although they were supposedly ready to sacrifice their precious youth the next morning for imperial Japan and for the emperor, they were torn beyond what words can express—some putting their heads on the table, some writing their wills, some folding their hands in meditation, some leaving the hall, and some dancing in a frenzy while breaking flower vases. They all took off wearing the rising sun headband the next morning. But this scene of utter desperation has hardly been reported. I observed it with my own eyes, as I took care of their daily life, which consisted of incredibly strenuous training, coupled with cruel and torturous corporal punishment as a daily routine.

from LAST LETTERS HOME

The following was written by Ensign Susumu Kaijitsu of the Genzan (Wonsan) Air Group in Korea. Kaijitsu was born in 1923 at Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture, in northern Kyushu. He had graduated from Nagoya Technical College just before entering the naval aviation school.

Dear Father, Mother, brothers Hiroshi and Takeshi, and sister Eiko:

I trust that this spring finds you all in fine health. I have never felt better and am now standing by, ready for action.

The other day I flew over our home and bade a last farewell to our neighbors and to you. Thanks to Mr. Yamakawa I had a chance recently to have a last drink with father, and there now remains nothing but to await our call to duty.

My daily activities are quite ordinary. My greatest concern is not about death, but rather of how I can be sure of sinking an enemy carrier. Ensigns Miyazaki, Tanaka, and Kimura, who will sortie as my wingmen, are calm and composed. Their behavior gives no indication that they are momentarily awaiting orders for their final crash-dive sortie. We spend our time in writing letters, playing cards, and reading.

I am confident that my comrades will lead our divine Japan to victory.

Words cannot express my gratitude to the loving parents who reared and tended me to manhood that I might in some small manner reciprocate the grace which His Imperial Majesty has bestowed upon us.

Please watch for the results of my meager effort. If they prove good, think kindly of me and consider it my good fortune to have done something that may be praiseworthy. Most important of all, do not weep for me. Though my body departs, I will return home in spirit and remain with you forever. My thoughts and best regards are with you, our friends, and neighbors. In concluding this letter, I pray for the well-being of my dear family.

***

Ensign Teruo Yamaguchi was born in 1923 on Goto Island, Nagasaki Prefecture, in northern Kyushu. Brought up by a stepmother, his youth had not been a particularly happy one. He enlisted upon graduation from Kokugakuin University in Tokyo and was assigned to the Amakusa Air Group, which was based near his home. From there, he was transferred to the 12th Air Flotilla for a suicide mission.

Dear Father:

As death approaches, my only regret is that I have never been able to do anything good for you in my life.

I was selected quite unexpectedly to be a special attack pilot and will be leaving for Okinawa today. Once the order was given for my one-way mission it became my sincere wish to achieve success in fulfilling this last duty. Even so, I cannot help feeling a strong attachment to this beautiful land of Japan. Is that a weakness on my part?

On learning that my time had come I closed my eyes and saw visions of your face, mother's, grandmother's, and the faces of my close friends. It was bracing and heartening to realize that each of you want me to be brave. I will do that! I will!

My life in the service has not been filled with sweet memories. It is a life of resignation and self denial, certainly not comfortable. As a *raison d'être* for service life, I can see only that it gives

me a chance to die for my country. If this seems bitter it probably is because I had experienced the sweetness of life before joining the service.

The other day I received Lieutenant Otsubo's philosophy on life and death which you so kindly sent. It seems to me that while he appears to have hit on some truth, he was concerned mostly with superficial thoughts on the service. It is of no avail to express it now, but in my 23 years of life I have worked out my own philosophy.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I think of the deceits being played on innocent citizens by some of our wily politicians. But I am willing to take orders from the high command, and even from the politicians, because I believe in the polity of Japan.

The Japanese way of life is indeed beautiful, and I am proud of it, as I am of Japanese history and mythology which reflect the purity of our ancestors and their belief in the past—whether or not those beliefs are true. That way of life is the product of all the best things which our ancestors have handed down to us. And the living embodiment of all wonderful things out of our past is the Imperial Family which, too, is the crystallization of the splendor and beauty of Japan and its people. It is an honor to be able to give my life in defense of these beautiful and lofty things.

Okinawa is as much a part of Japan as Goto Island. An inner voice keeps saying that I must smite the foe who violates our homeland. My grave will be the sea around Okinawa, and I will see my mother and grandmother again. I have neither regret nor fear about death. I only pray for the happiness of you and all my fellow-countrymen.

My greatest regret in this life is the failure to call you "*chichiue*" (revered father). I regret not having given any demonstration of the true respect which I have always had for you. During my final plunge, though you will not hear it, you may be sure that I will be saying "*chichiue*" to you and thinking of all you have done for me.

I have not asked you to come to see me at the base because I know that you are comfortable at Amakusa. It is a good place to live. The mountains north of the base remind me of Sugiyama and Magarisaka on Goto Island, and I have often thought of the days when you took Akira and me on picnics to Matsuyama near the powder magazine. I also recall riding with you to the crematorium at Magarisaka as a youngster, without clearly understanding then that mother had died.

I leave everything to you. Please take good care of my sisters.

One setback in its history does not mean the destruction of a nation. I pray that you will live long. I am confident that a new Japan will emerge. Our people must not be rash in their desire for death.

Fondest regards.

Just before departure,
Teruo

Without regard for life or name, a samurai will defend his homeland.

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The following letter is by Flying Petty Officer First Class Isao Matsuo of the 701st Air Group. It was written just before he sortied for a kamikaze attack. His home was in Nagasaki Prefecture.

28 October 1944

Dear Parents:

Please congratulate me. I have been given a splendid opportunity to die. This is my last day. The destiny of our homeland hinges on the decisive battle in the seas to the south where I shall fall like a blossom from a radiant cherry tree.

I shall be a shield for His Majesty and die cleanly along with my squadron leader and other friends. I wish that I could be born seven times, each time to smite the enemy.

How I appreciate this chance to die like a man! I am grateful from the depths of my heart to the parents who have reared me with their constant prayers and tender love. And I am grateful as well to my squadron leader and superior officers who have looked after me as if I were their own son and given me such careful training.

Thank you, my parents, for the 23 years during which you have cared for me and inspired me. I hope that my present deed will in some small way repay what you have done for me. Think well of me and know that your Isao died for our country. This is my last wish, and there is nothing else that I desire.

I shall return in spirit and look forward to your visit at the Yasukuni Shrine. Please take good care of yourselves.

How glorious is the Special Attack Corps' Giretsu Unit whose *Suisei* bombers will attack the enemy. Movie cameramen have been here to take our pictures. It is possible that you may see us in newsreels at the theater.

We are 16 warriors manning the bombers. May our death be as sudden and clean as the shattering of crystal.

Written at Manila on the eve of our sortie.

Isao

Soaring into the sky of the southern seas, it is our glorious mission to die as the shields of His Majesty. Cherry blossoms glisten as they open and fall.

***

Cadet Jun Nomoto of the Himeji Air Group had graduated from the University of Commerce in Tokyo just before enlisting. Apparently written in great haste, the actual letter is preceded by brief notes and is concluded in a hand other than that of the original writer.

Dearest Parents:

Please excuse my dictating these last words to my friend. There is no longer time for me to write more to you.

There is nothing special that I can say, but I want you to know that I am in the best of health at this last moment. It is my great honor to have been selected for this duty. The first planes of my group are already in the air. These words are being written by my friend as he rests the paper on the fuselage of my plane. There are no feelings of remorse or sadness here. My outlook is unchanged. I will perform my duty calmly.

Words cannot express my gratitude to you. It is my hope that this last act of striking a blow at the enemy will serve to repay in small measure the wonderful things you have done for me.

My last wish is that my brothers may have a proper education. It is certain that uneducated men have an empty life. Please see to it that their lives are as full as possible. I know that my sister is well taken care of because you have provided for her as you did for me. I am grateful for a wonderful father and mother.

I shall be satisfied if my final effort serves as recompense for the heritage our ancestors bequeathed.

Farewell!

Jun

MURTAZA MUTAHHARI (1920–1979)

The Martyr: On Jihad, Suicide and Martyrdom

(expanded in Archive)

Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari (also spelled Morteza Motahhari or Motah-hary), a traditional Shi'ite mujtahid *and scholar influential in the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1978–79), was born in a small town in the province of Khorasan, Iran, and studied at the Madrasah-e Fayziyah in Qom, later famous as a center of revolutionary students of theology. Mutahhari studied Islamic jurisprudence under Ayatollah Khomeini, whom he found impressive for his knowledge of philosophy and ethics, and was his devoted student for 12 years. At 23, Mutahhari began the formal study of philosophy; at 25, he discovered communist literature; and at 29, he began to study the works of the 10th-century Islamic thinker Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Mutahhari wrote works in philosophy, jurisprudence, and theology; he taught philosophy at the University of Tehran. Despite his comparatively scholastic and traditional scholarship, he voiced strong social concerns, and played both a philosophical and a political role in the leadership of the Iranian Revolution. In 1978, at Khomeini's request, Mutahhari founded the Council of the Islamic Revolution, which continued to organize revolutionary forces even after the Shah was deposed. Mutahhari was assassinated in 1979 as he left a meeting and is now regarded as a martyr of the Islamic Revolution.*

In the lecture presented here, Mutahhari examines the notions of jihad *and* shahadat. *The Arabic term* jihad, *which means struggle, exertion, or expenditure of effort, and may include personal strivings for one's own purity of motive and commitment, as well as armed struggle with the enemies of Islam, does not coincide precisely with the notion of holy war, though it is often used that way in the West; the Arabic* shahadat *may mean martyrdom or witnessing. In his lecture, Mutahhari argues that war intended to spread Islam by force among disbelievers is not allowed, but at the same time, one must fight to resist persecution and oppression, thus both helping the weak and simultaneously preparing the ground for the spread of Islam by peaceful means. Islam is to be defended by violent means if necessary—this is* jihad, *and the* shahid *(i.e., witness, martyr) who commits himself to this cause is one who "infuses new blood into an otherwise anaemic society." Mutahhari distinguishes sharply between suicide or self-murder, "the worst kind of death," and* shahadat, *the conscious, elective sacrifice of life for the sake of a sacred cause: This is "the only type of death which is higher, greater and holier than life itself."*

Sources

Morteza Motah-hary [Mutahhari], *The Martyr* (Houston, TX: Free Islamic Literatures, Inc., 1980), pp. 3–28. Quotations in introductory material from Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhaus, eds., *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam* (Houston, TX: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986), pp. v-vii, 2, 12, 35–38, 128.

from THE MARTYR: ON JIHAD, SUICIDE AND MARTYRDOM

Introduction

. . . In Islamic terminology, there is a word which has a special sanctity. When anyone familiar with the Islamic modes of expressions hears this word, he feels it to be invested with a special glory. This word is shaheed or martyr. . . .

From the Islamic point of view, only that person is regarded to have secured the status of a martyr whom Islam recognizes as having acted according to its own standard. Only he, who is killed in an effort to achieve the highest Islamic objectives and is really motivated by a desire of safeguarding true human values, attains this position, which is one of the highest a man can aspire for. . . .

The Martyr

Martyr's Proximity to Allah

The Holy Qur'an in respect of the Martyr's proximity to Allah says: "Think not of those who were slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are alive, finding their sustenance with their Lord."

In Islam, when a meritorious person or deed is to be exalted, it is said that particular person has the status of a martyr, or a particular act merits the reward of martyrdom. For example, with regards to a student, who seeks knowledge with the motive of finding out the truth and gaining the favour of Allah, it is said, that if he dies while learning, he dies the death of a martyr. This expression denotes the high status and sanctity of a student. Similarly, with regards to a person who takes pain and labours strenuously for the support of his family, it is said that he is like a fighter in the way of Allah. It may be noted that Islam is severely opposed to lethargy and parasitism, and regards hard work as a duty.

Martyr's Prerogative

All those who have served humanity in one way or the other, whether as scholars, philosophers, inventors or as teachers, deserve the gratitude of mankind. But no one deserves it, to the extent the martyrs do. . . . [A]ll other servants of humanity are indebted to the martyrs; whereas the martyrs are not indebted to them. . . .

He can be compared to a candle, whose job is to burn out and get extinguished, in order to shed light for the benefit of others. The martyrs are the candles of society. They burn themselves out and illuminate society. If they do not shed their light, no organization can shine.

A man who works in the light of the sun during the day, and in the light of a lamp or a candle at night, pays heed to everything, but his attention is not drawn to the source of light, while it goes without saying, that without that light he can accomplish nothing. The martyrs are the illuminators of society. Had they not shed their light on the darkness of despotism and suppression, humanity would have made no progress.

. . . According to an Islamic law, the dead body of every Muslim has to be washed ceremoniously, and shrouded in neat and clean sheets. Thereafter prayers have to be performed and only then it is buried. . . .

. . . The body of a martyr is neither to be washed, nor is it to be shrouded in fresh sheets. He is to be buried in those very clothes, which he had on his body, at the time of his death.

This exception has a deep significance. It shows that the spirit and the personality of a martyr are so thoroughly purified that his body, his blood and his garments are also affected by this purification. . . .

Reasons of Sanctity

What is the basis of the sanctity of martyrdom? It is evident that merely being killed can have no sanctity. . . .

. . . We know that there are several kinds of death:

1) Natural Death: If a man dies a natural death, after completing his normal span of life, his death is considered to be an ordinary event. It is neither a matter of pride nor of shame. It is not even a matter of much sorrow.
2) Accidental Death: Death as the result of accidents or an epidemic disease . . . is considered to be premature, and hence is regarded as regrettable.
3) Criminal Death: In this case, a person kills another in cold blood simply to satisfy his own passion or because he considered the victim to be his opponent or rival. . . .

In such cases, the action of the murderer is considered to be atrociously criminal and heinous, and the person killed is regarded as a victim of aggression and tyranny, whose life has been taken in vain. The reaction, which such a murder creates, is one of horror and pity. It is evident that such a death is shocking and pitiable, but it is neither praise-worthy nor a matter of pride. . . .

4) Self-murder: In this case, the death itself constitutes a crime, and hence, it is the worst kind of death. Suicidal deaths and the deaths of those who are killed in motor accidents because of their own fault, come under this category. The same is the case of the death of those who are killed while committing a crime.
5) Martyrdom: Martyrdom is the death of a person who, in spite of being fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly faces them for the sake of a sacred cause, or, as the Holy Qur'an says, in the way of Allah.

It has two basic elements: a) The life is sacrificed for a cause; and b) the sacrifice is made consciously. Usually in the case of martyrdom, an element of crime is involved. As far as the victim is concerned, his death is sacred, but as far as his killers are concerned, their action is a heinous crime.

Martyrdom is heroic and admirable, because it results from a voluntary, conscious and selfless action. It is the only type of death which is higher, greater and holier than life itself. . . .

Jihad or Martyr's Responsibility

The sacred cause that leads to martyrdom or the giving of one's life, has become a law in Islam. It is called Jihad. . . .

. . . The Holy Qur'an in many of its passages, has mentioned three sacred concepts, side by side. They are faith, hijrat [migration] and jihad. The man of the Qur'an is a being attached to faith and detached from everything else. To save his own faith, he migrates, and to save society he carries out jihad. . . .

Jihad is a door to Paradise, but it is not open to all and sundry. Everyone is not worthy of it; Everyone is not elected to become a mujahid. Allah has opened this door for his chosen friends

only. . . . Similarly, these doors cannot be for different classes of people for there is no class distinction in the next world. There, the people will not be classified according to their social status or profession.

. . . The door through which the mujahids and the martyrs will enter, and the portion of Paradise set aside for them, is the one which is reserved for Allah's chosen friends, who will be graced with His special favour.

Jihad is the garment of piety. . . . Piety consists of true purity, that is, freedom from spiritual and moral pollutions which are rooted in selfishness, vanity and aliveness, merely for personal profit and pleasure. . . . A mujahid is the purest of all the pure. He exercises complete self-negation and self-sacrifice. The door which is opened to him is different from the doors opened to others morally undefiled. . . .

. . . The piety of the mujahids, is one of supreme self-sacrifice. They sincerely renounce all they possess, and surrender themselves to Allah. Thus, they put on a garment of piety.

Jihad is an impenetrable armour of Allah. A Muslim community equipped with the spirit of Jihad cannot be vulnerable to the enemy's assaults. Jihad is a reliable shield of Allah. The armour is the defensive covering worn during fighting, but the shield is a tool taken in hand, to foil the enemy's strokes and thrusts. . . .

Allah will clothe with a garment of humiliation, a person who refrains from Jihad because he dislikes it. The people who lose the spirit of fighting and resisting the forces of evil, are doomed to humiliation, disgrace, bad-luck and helplessness. . . .

According to another hadith, the Holy Prophet has been quoted as having said: "He who did not fight and did not even think of fighting will die the death of a sort of hypocrite." Jihad, or at least a desire to take part in it, is an integral part of the doctrine of Islam. One's fidelity to Islam is judged by it. Another hadith reports the Holy Prophet as having said that a martyr would not be interrogated in his grave. The Holy Prophet said that the flash of the sword over his head, was enough of a test. A martyr's fidelity, having once been proved, has no need of any further interrogation.

Longing for Martyrdom

In the early days of Islam, many Muslims had a special spirit, which may be called the spirit of longing for martyrdom. . . .

. . . [E]veryone, whether young or old, high or low had this longing. Sometimes the people came to the Holy Prophet and expressed this desire. Islam does not allow suicide. They wanted to take part in jihad, and to be killed while doing their duty. They requested the Holy Prophet to pray to Allah to grant them martyrdom.

Martyr's Blood

What does a martyr do? His function is not confined to resisting the enemy, and in the process, either giving him a blow or receiving a blow from him. Had that been the case, we could say, that when his blood is shed, it goes waste. But at no time is a martyr's blood wasted. It does not flow on the ground. Every drip of it is turned into hundreds and thousands of drops, nay into tons of blood, and is transfused into the body of his society. . . .

Martyr's Courage and Zeal

The distinctive characteristic of a martyr, is that he charges the atmosphere with courage and zeal. He revives the spirit of valour and fortitude, courage and zeal, especially divine zeal, among

the people who have lost it. That is why Islam is always in need of martyrs. The revival of courage and zeal is essential for the revival of a nation.

Martyr's Immortality

. . . [A] martyr immortalizes himself in his own way. He gives invaluable fresh blood to the society. . . . That is why, the Holy Prophet said: "Above every virtue, there is another virtue, but there is no virtue higher than being killed in the way of Allah."

THICH NHAT HANH (1926–)

from *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire: In Search of the Enemy of Man*

Thich Nhat Hanh, a scholar in the field of philosophy of religion and an internationally revered figure of Zen Buddhism, was born Nguy˜n Xuân Bảo in Vietnam in 1926. (The word "Thich" [pronounced tick*] is not a title, but a name that, for Buddhist monks and nuns, replaces the family name to which they were born.) Thich Nhat Hanh became a Zen monk at the age of 16 and was ordained in 1949. He founded the School of Youth for Social Services, a neutral relief corps, and the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Vietnam in 1957. In 1969, Nhat Hanh was the representative for the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation at the Paris peace talks during the Vietnam War; when the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, he was officially denied reentry into Vietnam. He has been a student at Princeton and a professor at Columbia. Having lived in exile since 1966 (he has been allowed to visit Vietnam regularly since negotiations in 2005), he now lives in Plum Village, a Buddhist retreat center he cofounded in southwestern France, and conducts mindfulness retreats in Europe and North America.*

To protest the anti-Buddhist policies of the Catholic president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, during the Vietnam War, in June 1963, an elderly Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, went to the crossroads at Phan-Dinh-Phung Street in Saigon, sat in the lotus position, poured gasoline on himself, and set himself on fire in order to call attention to the sufferings of the Vietnamese people under Diem's oppressive regime. As he burned to death, a disciple read his last words to the press. Other Buddhist monks and nuns followed Quang Duc's example: six burned themselves to death within a short period. Unimpressed, Madame Nhu, Diem's sister-in-law, described these self-immolations as a "barbecue."

It is the self-immolations of Thich Quang Duc, Thich Giac Thanh (mentioned in the selection presented here), and the other Buddhist monks and nuns that Nhat Hanh is attempting to explain to a sceptical world in the letter reprinted here. The letter is intended particularly for Westerners who see these acts as suicides, acts of self-destruction stemming from lack of courage, loss of hope, or the desire for nonexistence. . . . Although Giac Thanh was young at the time of his death, Quang Duc was over 70. Nhat Hanh had lived with the older monk for nearly a year at Long-Vinh

pagoda before he set himself on fire, and describes him as "a very kind and lucid person . . . calm and in full possession of his mental faculties when he burned himself." Nhat Hanh insists that these acts of self-immolation are not suicide, which, he says, is one of Buddhism's "most serious crimes." Nhat Hanh's letter "In Search of the Enemy of Man" is addressed to Martin Luther King, who nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Sources

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from VIETNAM: LOTUS IN A SEA OF FIRE: IN SEARCH OF THE ENEMY OF MAN

From a letter by Thich Nhat Hanh addressed to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., June 1, 1965

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with utmost courage, frankness, determination, and sincerity. During the ceremony of ordination, as practiced in the Mahayana tradition, the monk-candidate is required to burn one or more small spots on his body in taking the vow to observe the 250 rules of a *bhikshu*, to live the life of a monk, to attain enlightenment, and to devote his life to the salvation of all beings. One can, of course, say these things while sitting in a comfortable armchair; but when the words are uttered while kneeling before the community of *sangha* and experiencing this kind of pain, they will express all the seriousness of one's heart and mind, and carry much greater weight.

The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people. But why does he have to burn himself to death? The difference between burning oneself and burning oneself to death is only a difference in degree, not in nature. A man who burns himself too much must die. The importance is not to take one's life, but to burn. What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death. In the Buddhist belief, life is not confined to a period of 60 or 80 or 100 years: life is eternal. Life is not confined to this body: life is universal. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but perform an act of construction, that is, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide. Suicide is an act of self-destruction, having as causes the following: (1) lack of courage to live and to cope with difficulties; (2) defeat by life and loss of all hope; (3) desire for nonexistence (*abhaya*).

This self-destruction is considered by Buddhism as one of the most serious crimes. The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire nonexistence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself: he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Like the Buddha in one of his former lives—as told in a story of Jataka—who gave himself to a hungry lioness which was about to devour her own cubs, the monk believes he is practicing the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself in order to call the attention of, and to seek help from, the people of the world.

I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred, and discrimination which lie within the heart of man. I also believe with all of my being that the struggle for equality and freedom you lead in Birmingham, Alabama, is not really aimed at the whites but only at intolerance, hatred, and discrimination. These are real enemies of man—not man himself. In our unfortunate fatherland we are trying to plead desperately: do not kill man, even in man's name. Please kill the real enemies of man which are present everywhere, in our very hearts and minds.

Now in the confrontation of the big powers occurring in our country, hundreds and perhaps thousands of Vietnamese peasants and children lose their lives every day, and our land is unmercifully and tragically torn by a war which is already twenty years old. I am sure that since you have been engaged in one of the hardest struggles for equality and human rights, you are among those who understand fully, and who share with all their heart, the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people. The world's greatest humanists would not remain silent. You yourself cannot remain silent. America is said to have a strong religious foundation and spiritual leaders would not allow American political and economic doctrines to be deprived of the spiritual element. You cannot be silent since you have already been in action and you are in action because, in you, God is in action, too—to use Karl Barth's expression. And Albert Schweitzer, with his stress on the reverence for life. And Paul Tillich with his courage to be, and thus, to love. And Niebuhr. And Mackay. And Fletcher. And Donald Harrington. All these religious humanists and many more, are not going to favor the existence of a shame such as the one mankind has to endure in Vietnam. Recently a young Buddhist monk named Thich Giac Thanh burned himself [April 20, 1965, in Saigon] to call the attention of the world to the suffering endured by the Vietnamese, the suffering caused by this unnecessary war—and you know that war is never necessary. Another young Buddhist, a nun named Hue Thien, was about to sacrifice herself in the same way and with the same intent, but her will was not fulfilled because she did not have the time to strike a match before people saw and interfered. Nobody here wants the war. What is the war for, then? And whose is the war?

Yesterday in a class meeting, a student of mine prayed: "Lord Buddha, help us to be alert to realize that we are not victims of each other. We are victims of our own ignorance and the ignorance of others. Help us to avoid engaging ourselves more in mutual slaughter because of the will of others to power and to predominance." In writing to you, as a Buddhist, I profess my faith in Love, in Communion, and in the World's Humanists, whose thoughts and attitude should be the guide for all humankind in finding who is the real enemy of Man.

MARY ROSE BARRINGTON (1926–)

from *Apologia for Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Born in London and educated at Oxford, Mary Rose Barrington became a lawyer and charity administrator, combining law practice with assisting in the management of a large group of almshouses for the aged. Her principal interests include voluntary euthanasia, animal protection, and psychical research. She is a past chairman of the London-based Voluntary Euthanasia Society (re-named EXIT, The Society for the Right to Die with Dignity, and renamed again Dignity in Dying). She has also been honorary secretary of the Animal Rights Group and is a vice -president of the Society for Psychical Research.

Barrington, an advocate of rational suicide and the notion of "planned death," argues that humane and advanced societies must embrace this notion—much as traditional pride in extensive procreation has given way to the concept of planned birth—in a world that is increasingly crowded, and increasingly populated by those who are old and no longer have a great desire to live. She argues in detail for the psychological comfort that the notion of planned death would give to the elderly, who might foresee and welcome their own deaths rather than waiting to be "passively suppressed."

Sources

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from APOLOGIA FOR SUICIDE

Of the many disagreeable features inherent in the human condition, none is more unpalatable than mortality. Many people declare that they find the concept of survival and immortal life both inconceivable and preposterous; but they will usually admit to a minimal pang at the thought of being snuffed out in due course and playing no further part in the aeons to come. That aeons have already passed before they were born is a matter that few people take to heart, and they tend on the whole to be rather glad not to have experienced the hardships of life before the era of the Public Health Acts and pain-killing drugs. To cease from being after having once existed seems altogether different and altogether terrible. . . . Many people who have no religious convictions save themselves from despair by filing away in their minds some small outside chance that they might, after all, survive, perhaps as some semi-anonymous cog in a universal system; many others resolutely refuse to give any thought to death at all.

If human convictions and behaviour were a direct function of logical thinking, one would expect that the more firmly a person believed in the survival of his soul in an existence unhampered by the frequently ailing body, the more ready he would be to leave this world and pass on to the next. Nothing of the sort appears to be the case, at least for those whose religion is based on the Old Testament. Self-preservation is presented in such religions as a duty, though one that is limited by some inconsistent provisos. . . .

The old notions about suicide, with an influence still lingering on, are well summarized by Sir William Blackstone in his famous *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9): "The suicide is guilty of a double offence: one spiritual, in invading the prerogative of the Almighty and rushing into his immediate presence uncalled for; the other temporal, against the King, who hath an interest in the preservation of all his subjects."

. . . The important matter to be considered is that while the humanist, the agnostic or the adherent of liberal religion seldom condemns suicide as a moral obliquity, he appears on the whole to find it as depressing and horrifying as the religious believer for whom it is sinful. There are many reasons for this, some good, and some regrettable.

Indoctrination against suicide is regrettably to be found at all levels. In itself the tendentious expression, "to commit suicide," is calculated to poison the unsuspecting mind with its false semantic overtones, for, apart from the dangerous practice of committing oneself to an opinion most other things committed are, as suicide once was, criminal offences. . . . Death from despair is the thing that ought to make us shudder, but the shudder is often extended to revulsion against the act of suicide that terminates the despair, an act that may be undertaken in very different circumstances.

. . . People who insist that life must always be better than death often sound as if they are choosing eternal life in contrast to eternal death, when the fact is that they have no choice in the matter; it is death now, or death later. Once this fact is fully grasped it is possible for the question to arise as to whether death now would not be preferable.

. . . [It] seems to me, a special case must be made out for people suffering from the sort of adversity with which the proponents of euthanasia are concerned: namely, an apparently irremediable state of physical debility that makes life unbearable to the sufferer. . . . Pain itself can be controlled, provided the doctor in charge is prepared to put the relief of pain before the prolongation of life; but analgesics will not help a patient to live with total incontinence, reduced to the status of a helpless baby after a life of independent adulthood. And for the person who manages to avoid these grave afflictions there remains the spectre of senile decay, a physical and mental crumbling into a travesty of the normal person. Could anything be more reasonable than for a person faced with these living deaths to weigh up the pros and cons of living out his life until his heart finally fails and going instead to meet death half-way?

It is true, of course, that, all things beings equal, people do want to go on living. If we are enjoying life, there seems no obvious reason to stop doing so and be mourned by our families and forgotten by our friends. If we are not enjoying it, then it seems a miserable end to die in a trough of depression, and better to wait for things to become more favourable. Most people, moreover, have a moral obligation to continue living, owed to their parents while they are still alive, their children while they are dependent, and their spouses all the time. Trained professional workers may even feel that they have a duty to society to continue giving their services. Whatever the grounds, it is both natural and reasonable that without some special cause nobody ever wants to die *yet*. But must these truisms be taken to embody the whole

truth about the attitude of thinking people to life and death? A psychiatrist has been quoted as saying: "I don't think you can consider anyone normal who tries to take his own life." The abnormality of the suicide is taken for granted, and the possibility that he might have been doing something sensible (for him) is not presented to the mind for even momentary consideration. It might as well be argued that no one can be considered normal who does not want to procreate as many children as possible, and this was no doubt urged by the wise men of yesterday; today the tune is very different, and in this essay we are concerned with what they may be singing tomorrow.

There is an obvious connection between attitudes to birth and to death, since both are the fundamentals of life. The experience of this century has shown that what may have appeared to be ineradicably basic instincts can in fact be modified in an advanced society, and modified not merely by external pressures, but by a corresponding feedback movement from within. . . . My thesis is that humane and advanced societies are ripe for a similar and in many ways equivalent swing away from the ideal of longevity to the concept of a planned death.

It may be worth pausing here to consider whether the words "natural end," in the sense usually ascribed to the term, have much bearing on reality. Very little is "natural" about our present-day existence, and least natural of all is the prolonged period of dying that is suffered by so many incurable patients solicitously kept alive to be killed by their disease. The sufferings of animals (other than man) are heart-rending enough, but a dying process spread over weeks, months or years seems to be one form of suffering that animals are normally spared. When severe illness strikes them they tend to stop eating, sleep and die. The whole weight of Western society forces attention on the natural right to live, but throws a blanket of silence over the natural right to die. . . .

This will probably be taken as, or distorted into, a demand for the infliction of the death penalty on retirement. . . . It cannot be said too many times that so long as people are blessed with reasonable health, reasonable independence and reasonable enjoyment of life, they have no more reason to contemplate suicide than people who are half their age, and frequently half as sprightly as many in their seventies and eighties today. Attention is here being drawn to people who unfortunately have good reason to question whether or not they want to exercise their right to live; the minor infirmities of age, and relative weakness, and a slight degree of dependence on younger people who regard the giving of a helping hand as a natural part of the life-cycle, do not give rise to any such question. The question arises when life becomes a burden rather than a pleasure.

Many middle-aged people are heard to express the fervent wish that they will not live to be pain-ridden cripples, deaf, dim-sighted or feeble-minded solitaries, such that they may become little else than a burden to themselves and to others. They say they *hope* they will die before any of these fates descend upon them, but they seldom affirm that they *intend* to die before that time; and when the time comes, it may barely cross their minds that they could, had they then the determination, take the matter into their own hands. The facile retort will often be that this merely goes to show that people do not really mean what they say and that like all normal, sensible folk, they really want to live on for as long as is physically possible. But this, I would suggest, is a false conclusion. They mean exactly what they say, but the conditions and conditioning of society make it impossible for them to act in accordance with their wishes. . . .

How different it would be if a person could talk over the future with his family, friends and doctors, make arrangements, say farewells, take stock of his life, and know that his decision

about when and how to end his life was a matter that could be the subject of constructive and sympathetic conference, and even that he could have his chosen ones around him at the last. . . .

But supposing the person contemplating suicide is not in fact undergoing or expecting to undergo severe suffering, but is merely an elderly relation, probably a mother, in fragile health, or partially disabled, and though not acutely ill is in need of constant care and attention. It would be unrealistic to deny the oppressive burden that is very often cast on the shoulders of a young to middle-aged person, probably a daughter, by the existence of an ailing parent, who may take her from her career when she is a young woman in her thirties or forties, and leave her, perhaps a quarter of a century later, an elderly, exhausted woman, demoralized over the years by frequently having had to choke back the wish that her mother would release her by dying. Even in a case such as this, human feeling does demand, I would think, that the younger person must still respond to intimations of suicide with a genuinely felt, "No, no."

But what of the older person's own attitude? Here we arrive at the kernel of the violent and almost panic-stricken reaction of many people to the idea of questioning whether it is better, in any given situation, to be or not to be. For if there is no alternative to continued living, then no choice arises, and hence there can be no possibility of an older person, who is a burden to a younger person, feeling a sense of obligation to release the captive attendant from willing or unwilling bondage, no questioning of the inevitability of the older person's living out her full term. But what if there were a real choice? What if a time came when, no longer able to look after oneself, the decision to live on for the maximum number of years were considered a mark of heedless egoism? What if it were to be thought that *dulce et decorum est pro familia mori*?

. . . [A] relation who had stood down from life in a spirit of magnanimity and family affection would, after an inevitable period of heart-searching and self-incrimination, leave behind a pleasant memory; a victim of callous treatment hanging like an accusing albatross around the neck of the living would suggest another and rather ugly story. . . .

. . . A physical decline threatens to be accompanied by an inevitable decline in the quality of important human relationships—human relationships, it is worth repeating, not superhuman ones. Given superhuman love, patience, fortitude and all other sweet-natured qualities in a plenitude not normally present in ordinary people, there would be no problem. But the problem is there, and voluntary termination of life offers a possible solution that may be better than none at all. The young have been urged from time immemorial to have valiant hearts, to lay down their lives for their loved ones when their lives have hardly started; it may be that in time to come the disabled aged will be glad to live in a society that approves an honourable death met willingly, perhaps in the company of another "old soldier" of the same generation, and with justifiable pride. Death taken in one's own time, and with a sense of purpose, may in fact be far more bearable than the process of waiting to be arbitrarily extinguished. A patient near the end of his life who arranged his death so as, for example, to permit an immediate transfer of a vital organ to a younger person, might well feel that he was converting his death into a creative act instead of waiting passively to be suppressed.

A lot of kindly people may feel that this is lacking in respect for the honourable estate of old age; but to insist on the obligation of old people to live through a period of decline and helplessness seems to me to be lacking in a feeling for the demands of human *self*-respect. They may reply that this shows a false notion of what constitutes self-respect, and that great spiritual qualities may be brought out by dependence and infirmity, and the response to such a state. It is tempting in a world dominated by suffering to find all misery purposeful, and indeed in some situations the "cross-to-bear" and the willing bearer may feel that they are contributing a poignant note to some cosmic

symphony that is richer for their patience and self-sacrifice. Since we are talking of options and not of compulsions, people who felt like this would no doubt continue to play their chosen parts, but what a truly ruthless thing to impose those parts on people who feel that they are meaningless and discordant, and better written out.

What should be clear is that with so many men and so many opinions there is no room here for rules of life, or ready-made solutions by formula, least of all by the blanket injunction that, rather than allow any of these questions to be faced, life must be lived out to the bitter end, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, until death brings release. . . .

Here again it must be made clear that what is needed is the fostering of a new attitude to death that should ultimately grow from within, and not be imposed from without upon people psychologically unable to rethink their ingrained views. The suffering and dying patients of today have been brought up to feel that it is natural and inevitable, and even some sort of a duty, to live out their terminal period, and it would do them no service to try to persuade them into adopting an attitude that to most of them would seem oppressive, as aimed against them rather than for their benefit. . . . It is future generations, faced perhaps with a lifespan of eighty or ninety years, of which nearly half will have to be dependent on the earning power of the other half, who will have to decide how much of their useful, active life is to be devoted to supporting themselves through a terminal period "*sans* everything," prolonged into a dreaded ordeal by ever-increasing medical skill directed to the preservation of life. It may well be that, as in the case of family planning, economic reality will open up a spring, the waters of which will filter down to deeper levels, and that then the new way of death will take root. . . . I would contend that the true end of education should be to prepare the pupil to learn in the course of life to orientate all knowledge and experience within the framework of a life bounded by decline and death, and to regard a timely and possibly useful death as the summation of the art of living. . . .

. . . Ending with a further complaint about linguistic misdirection, my final objection to tainted words is that a patient ending his own life, or a doctor assisting him to end it, is said to "take life," just as a thief "takes" property with the intention of depriving the owner of something he values. Whatever it is that is taken from a dying patient, it is nothing he wants to keep, and the act is one of giving rather than taking. The gift is death, a gift we shall all have to receive in due course, and if we can bring ourselves to choose our time for acceptance, so much the better for us, for our family, for our friends and for society.

DANIEL CALLAHAN (1930–)

from *Reason, Self-determination, and Physician-Assisted Suicide* (expanded in Archive)

Educated at Yale, Georgetown, and Harvard, Daniel Callahan was a cofounder of The Hastings Center, the first institute for bioethics, in 1969, and served as its president from 1969–1996. Callahan's interests in bioethics range from the beginning to the end of life, and in later years have focused on health policy and research policy with an increasing concern for global issues. He is the author or editor of some 40 books. Particularly influential has been Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society, *which launched an extensive discussion of intergenerational justice and the appropriate limits of health care for the elderly.*

In the article excerpted here, Callahan responds to the claims of those supporting legalization of physician-assisted suicide in terminal illness. Callahan argues against this view on three grounds: that euthanasia and assisted suicide are evil, or more accurately, "morally mistaken"; that while physical pain and psychological suffering in the terminally ill are to be alleviated, assisted dying is not the way to do it; and that allowing physician-assisted suicide will risk wider killing based on "private standards of a life worth living"—the slippery slope argument. These are among the most prominent arguments in the case against legalization of assisted dying.

Sources

Daniel Callahan, "Reason, Self-determination, and Physician-Assisted Suicide," in Kathleen Foley and Herbert Hendin, eds., *The Case against Assisted Suicide: For the Right to End-of-Life Care* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 52–68; amended by author in 2014. Biographical material in the introductory passage from The Hastings Center.

from REASON, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE

Claiming the right to control our bodies and our lives is characteristically American. "Give me liberty or give me death" is a part of our history. It could thus well be said that the physician-assisted suicide movement represents the last, definitive step in gaining full individual self-determination: "Give me liberty and, if I want it, give me death." As a movement, physician-assisted suicide seeks to reassure us that we can die as we choose and, with a physician's expert help, be certain that we will die in the most technically expeditious fashion.

However mistaken in its direction and emphasis (as I will argue it is), a turn to physician-assisted suicide is a perfectly understandable response to the increased difficulty of dying a peaceful death, a dying ever more ensnared in technological and moral traps. First, there are all the cultural and medical obstacles now thrown in the way of simply allowing people to die from disease. Medicine tends to conflate the value of the sanctity of life and the technological imperative, rendering an acceptance of death morally suspect. Moreover, by increasingly judging all deaths to be events for which humans can and should take responsibility, we are blurring the distinction between killing and allowing to die; there is now every incentive to seek final and decisive control over the process of dying. Physician-assisted suicide seems to present the perfect way to do just that.

The physician-assisted suicide movement rests on two basic claims, secondarily supported by other considerations as well. Those claims are our right to self-determination and the obligation

we all owe to each other to relieve suffering, but especially the obligation of the physician to do so. The movement's deepest point might simply be understood as this: If we cannot trust disease to take our lives quickly or peacefully, and we cannot rely on doctors to know with great precision how or when to stop treatment to allow that to happen, then we have a right to turn to more direct means. In the name of mercy, physicians should be allowed to end our lives at our voluntary request, or, alternatively, be permitted to put into our hands those means that will allow us to commit suicide. We will then be assured a peaceful death, one that we have fashioned for ourselves. For the peaceful death no longer (and never assuredly and perfectly) given us by nature, we must shape, by our choice, a death of our own making.

This is a dangerous direction to go in the search for a peaceful death. This path to peaceful dying rests on the illusion that a society can safely put in the hands of physicians the power directly and deliberately to take life, euthanasia, or to assist patients in taking their own life, physician-assisted suicide. (I see no moral difference between them—just as the law in most places would see no difference between my shooting someone and my giving a gun to another so he or she can do it.) It threatens to add still another sad chapter to an already sorry human history of giving one person the liberty to take the life of another. It perpetuates and pushes to an extreme the very ideology of control—the goal of mastering life and death—that created the problems of modern medicine in the first place. Instead of changing the medicine that generates the problem of an intolerable death (which, in almost all cases, good palliative medicine could do), allowing physicians to kill or provide the means to take one's own life simply treats the symptoms, all the while reinforcing, and driving us more deeply into, an ideology of control. . . .

The Relief of Suffering: Virtues and Duties

. . . The problem of physician-assisted suicide forces us to answer a hard question: Ought the general duty of the physician to relieve suffering encompass the right to assist a patient to take his or her own life if that is desired and seems necessary? The question can be put from the patient's side as well: Is it a legitimate moral request for a patient to ask a doctor for assistance in committing suicide?

But there is an even more fundamental question that must be explored before turning to these questions: What should be done in response to such suffering? Is it simply a nice thing to relieve suffering if we can, a gesture of charity or kindness worthy of praise? We might say that our impulse of compassion is a good to be cultivated and expressed—that we will all be better off if we entertain that as an ideal in our lives together. Or is there more to it than that? Might it be that the relief of suffering is a moral duty, not just a noble ideal, to which we are obliged even if our sense of compassion is faint, even if what is asked of us might cause some suffering on our own part? How far and in what way, that is, does our duty extend in the relief of suffering, and just what kind of suffering is encompassed within such a duty? . . .

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of burdens. In one, the demand on us is to act, to do something specifically to relieve the suffering. That may mean giving our already overcrowded time just to be with someone in pain, someone whose first need is for companionship, for closeness; or providing otherwise needed money to improve the nursing care of a dying parent; or taking the trouble to find a better doctor, or hospital, for a spouse receiving poor care. Demands of that kind can be heavy, pressing our sense of duty to the limit; sometimes it can be unclear just where the limit is.

The other burden is subtler: the need to discern when suffering cannot, or should not, be wholly overcome, when our duty may be to accept the suffering of another, just as the person whose suffering it is must accept it. Many legitimate moral demands, for instance, will carry with them the possibility of suffering, and they should not for that reason be shirked. . . .

For just those reasons it cannot be fully correct to say that our highest moral duty to each other is the relief of suffering. More precisely, our duty is to enhance one another's good and welfare, and the relief of suffering will ordinarily be an important way to accomplish that. But not always. What we need to know is whether the suffering exists because without it some other human good cannot be attained; and that is exactly the case with the suffering caused by living out one's moral duties or ideals for a life.

Therein lies the ambiguity of the term "unnecessary suffering," frequently invoked as the kind of suffering physician-assisted suicide can obviate. Suffering will surely be "unnecessary" when it serves no purpose, when it is not an inextricable part of achieving important human goals. Unavoidable necessary suffering, by contrast, is that which is the essential means, or accompaniment, of valuable human ends, and not all suffering is. Yet the real problem here is in deciding on our goals, and the hardest choice will be in deciding whether, and how, to pursue goals that may entail suffering. If we make the avoidance or relief of suffering itself the highest goal, we run the severe risk of sacrificing, or minimizing, other human purposes. Life would then be focused on avoiding pain, minimizing risk, and craftily eying all possible life projects and goals in light of their likelihood of producing suffering.

If that is hardly desirable in the living of our individual lives, it is no less problematic in devising social policy. A society ought, so far as it can, to work for the relief of pain and suffering; and that is to state a simple moral principle. But a more complex principle is needed: A society should work to relieve only suffering that is not an unavoidable part of living out its other values and aspirations. That means it must ask, on the one hand, what those values are or should be and, on the other, what policies for the relief of suffering might subvert society's general values.

The most profound question we must then ask is this: If the suffering of illness and dying comes from the profound assault on our sense of integrity and self-direction, what is the best way we can—as those who give care, who want to do right by a person—honor that integrity? The claim of proponents of physician-assisted suicide is that the assault of terminal illness on the self is legitimately relieved, even mercifully and honorably so, by recognizing the right to self-determination to end that life.

Yet notice what we have accepted here. It is the idea that our integrity can be served only by the self-determination that brings death, by the direct implication of another in our death, and by accepting the implicit assumption that the suffering is "unnecessary"—meaningless, avoidable. To accept that comes close to declaiming that life can have meaning only if marked by self-determination, a strange notion indeed, flying directly in the face of human experience. That experience shows that a noble and heroic life can be achieved by those who have little or no control over the external conditions of their lives, but have the wisdom and dignity necessary to fashion a meaningful life without it. We would also be declaring that a life not marked by self-mastery, self-determination, is a meaningless one once burdened with unwanted suffering. It is not for nothing perhaps that modern medicine in its quest for cure has itself contributed to the harmful idea that all suffering is pointless, representing not life and its natural condition but the failure of medicine to overcome, or relieve, that suffering. . . .

The Logic of the Arguments

Where are the flaws in these arguments? Recall that there are two classical arguments in favor of euthanasia and assisted suicide: our right of self-determination, and our claim on the mercy of others to relieve our suffering if they can do so, especially our claim on doctors. These two arguments are typically spliced together and presented as a single contention. Yet if they are considered independently—and there is no inherent reason they must be linked—they display serious problems. Consider first the argument for our right of self-determination. It is said that a competent adult ought to have a right to physician-assisted suicide for the relief of suffering. But why must the person be suffering? Does not that stipulation already compromise the right of self-determination? How can self-determination have any limits? Why are not the person's desires or motives, whatever they be, sufficient? How can we justify this arbitrary limitation of self-determination? The standard arguments for physician-assisted suicide offer no answers to those questions.

Consider next the person who is suffering but not competent, perhaps demented or mentally retarded. The standard argument would deny euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide to that person. But why? If a person is suffering but not competent, then it would seem grossly unfair to deny that person relief simply because he or she lacked competence. Are the incompetent less entitled to relief from suffering than the competent? Will it only be affluent, middle-class people, mentally fit and able, who can qualify? Will those who are incompetent but suffering be denied that which those who are intellectually and emotionally better off can have? Would that be fair? Do they suffer less for being incompetent? The standard argument about our duty to relieve suffering offers no response to those questions either.

Is it, however, fair to euthanasia advocates to do what I have done, to separate and treat individually the two customary arguments in favor of a legal right to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide? The implicit reason for joining them is no doubt the desire to avoid abuse. By requiring a showing of suffering and terminal illness, the aim is to exclude perfectly healthy people from demanding that, in the name of self determination and for their own private reasons, another person can be called on to kill them or assist them in suicide. By requiring a show of mental competence to effect self-determination, the aim is to exclude the nonvoluntary or involuntary killing of those who are depressed, retarded, or demented.

My contention is that the joining of those two requirements is perfectly arbitrary, a jerry-rigged combination if ever there was one. Each has its own logic, and each could be used to justify euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. But that logic, it seems evident, offers little resistance to denying any competent person the right to be killed, sick or not, and little resistance to killing those who are not competent, so long as there is good reason to believe they are suffering. There is no principled reason to reject that logic, and no reason to think it could long remain suppressed by the expedient of an arbitrary legal stipulation that both features, suffering and competence, be present. In fact, in its statutes on physician-assisted suicide the state of Oregon requires a terminal illness only, not a condition of suffering also. The result, of course, has been to remove a potential barrier to physician-assisted suicide.

There is a related problem worth considering. If the act of physician-assisted suicide, conventionally understood, requires the uncoerced request and consent of the patient, it no less requires that the person to do the assisting have his or her own independent moral standards for acceding to the request. The doctor must act with integrity. How can a doctor who voluntarily

brings about, or is instrumental in, the death of another legitimately justify the act? Would the mere claim of self-determination on the part of someone be sufficient? "It is my body, doctor, and I request that you help me kill myself." There is historical resistance to that kind of claim, and doctors quite rightly have never been willing to do what patients want solely because they want it. To do so would reduce doctors to automatons, subordinating their integrity to patient wishes or demands. There is surely a legitimate fear, moreover, that if such claim were sanctioned, there would be no reason to forbid any two competent persons from entering into an agreement for one to kill the other, a form of consenting-adult killing. Perhaps the resistance also arises out of a reluctance to put doctors in the role of taking life simply as a means of advancing patient self-determination, quite apart from any medical reasons for doing so. . . .

Curing One Evil with Another

Physical pain and psychological suffering among those who are critically ill and dying are great evils. The attempt to relieve them by the introduction of euthanasia and assisted suicide is an even greater evil, or to speak more accurately, is even more gravely morally mistaken, a softer notion that does not presuppose malicious motives. Those practices threaten the future security of the living. They no less threaten the dying themselves. Once a society allows one person to take the life of another based on their mutual private standards of a life worth living, there can be no safe or sure way to contain the deadly virus thus introduced. It will go where it will thereafter. The belief that physician-assisted suicide can be safely regulated is a myth—the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship makes it impossible to provide adequate oversight. Since we cannot know what goes on in the privacy of the doctor-patient encounter, we can never know whether, and to what extent, laws regulating physician-assisted suicide (and euthanasia as well) will be violated or ignored. The lack of any correlation between suffering and a desire for suicide means, of necessity, that physicians will have enormous discretion in assisting in suicide—but no way of knowing how to make a definitive evaluation of the extent of, or the legitimacy of, the suffering the patient reports.

PETER Y. WINDT (1938 –)

What Counts as Suicide? It's Not So Easy to Say

Peter Y. Windt, formerly associate professor of philosophy at the University of Utah and former chairman of the department, has worked on many problems in bioethics, especially the ethics of (re)designing human nature; philosophical method and problems of informal logic; and problems in epistemic justification.

Windt's analysis of the concept of suicide suggests that disagreement over the definition of "suicide" leads to confused thinking and thus to confused social policy. Arguing that the concept of suicide

is "open-textured," he provides a Wittgensteinian analysis of the concept "suicide" in terms of criteria, characteristics in virtue of which an event is a suicide, but which are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. Thus, to suppose that the term 'suicide' always has a core, clearly definable meaning, or that deaths can be clearly classified as suicide or not, is mistaken. Prof. Windt was influential in the genesis of this collection of historical sources.

Source

Peter Y. Windt, adapted from "The Concept of Suicide," in M. Pabst Battin and David J. Mayo, eds., *Suicide: The Philosophical Issues*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980, pp. 39–47.

WHAT COUNTS AS SUICIDE? IT'S NOT SO EASY TO SAY

What counts as suicide? In many disputes over social practices, opponents call the act *suicide*; proponents call it something else, for example, *self-sacrifice, self-caused accident, martyrdom, heroism, self-deliverance, self-defense, aided dying,* and so on. This is because the very term 'suicide' often has strongly negative connotations, while alternative terms may have comparatively positive associations. If we are to make moral claims about the ethics of suicide, we need to have some idea of what counts as suicide; but this is a harder problem than it may seem.

Consider, then, what must be the case in order for an act to count as suicide. It might be thought that death must occur in all cases of suicide. But where an attempt at suicide (say, by shooting) results in enough brain damage to destroy the personality, or where abuse of alcohol or other drugs produces radical destruction of memory and character, we sometimes are tempted to speak of suicide, even though the body survives. If calling such cases suicides is not mere metaphor or exaggeration, then death of the organism will not be a necessary condition of suicide (however, we might then make a case for death of the *person* as a necessary condition). To sidestep the debate about the nature of persons and the definition of death, let us suppose, tentatively, that death, either of the person or of the organism, is a necessary condition of suicide.

If we concede that death is a necessary condition of suicide, then we also may want to concede that another necessary condition is the applicability of some reflexive description of the death. One such description would be that one has killed oneself. In other cases it is more appropriate to say one has gotten oneself killed; and in still other cases that one has let oneself be killed. For example, one may commit suicide by shooting oneself deliberately and with premeditation (killing oneself). Or one may commit suicide by ordering a servant to do the job (getting oneself killed). Or, on falling into a river, one may opt for suicide and refuse to swim (letting oneself be killed). One might even kill oneself by deliberately starting a fight, offering little resistance, and thereby letting oneself by killed (as intended), getting oneself killed, and committing suicide—all at once. Thus, while some cases of suicide might involve the deceased being killed by someone else or someone else's getting him killed or letting him be killed, the deceased must also kill himself or get himself killed or let himself be killed.

But the applicability of one or more of these descriptions is not a sufficient condition of suicide. One who drives into a rock wall, mistaking a late-evening shadow for a tunnel entrance,

has killed himself. It is less natural to say he has gotten himself killed, and wrong to say he has let himself be killed. One who comes between a grizzly bear sow and her cubs while trying to photograph them may get himself killed, but not kill himself (the bear does that) nor let himself be killed (he puts up a good fight, under the circumstances). A prisoner may let himself be killed, rather than give information, but does not thereby get himself killed, nor kill himself. None of these cases should be counted as suicide.

Then what other features distinguish suicide from other kinds of death? The literature on suicide mentions several factors: that death was caused by the actions or behavior of the deceased; that the deceased wanted, desired, or wished death; that the deceased intended, chose, decided, or willed to die; that the deceased knew that death would result from his behavior; that the deceased was responsible for his death. My contention is that all these factors are *criteria* of suicide, rather than necessary or sufficient conditions.

To analyze the concept of suicide in this way is to approach the question of what is suicide as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein [q.v.] would, by offering an account that is *open-textured*. This means that characteristics of cases of suicide may be found which are definitional, in the sense that they really are the characteristics by virtue of which an event is a suicide, but which are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for an event's being a case of suicide—that is, for each such characteristic, cases of suicide may be found which do not have the characteristic, and cases may be found of events which have the characteristic but are not cases of suicide. Such characteristics are *criteria* of suicide. If the concept of suicide is open-textured, then, it must involve some criteria. This is not to deny that some definitional characteristics of suicide may be necessary conditions, nor is it to deny that some complex combination of characteristics of suicide may constitute a sufficient condition. It is to deny that there is some nuclear set of characteristics which is to be found in all cases of suicide—some core, indispensible characteristics--and in no other cases.

The claim that a concept is open-textured need not indicate that it is arbitrary, vague, or inconsistent. While different criteria may be involved in different cases, we should expect to find similarities among the whole family of cases which justify their assimilation under a single concept. Such similarities will be the result of different combinations of criteria (and any necessary conditions) under different circumstances. And, because similarity is capable of degrees and variations, we might expect to find that some cases of suicide are paradigms, while others, though still genuine cases of suicide, exhibit various atypical characteristics. And we can expect to encounter borderline cases which are similar to typical cases of suicide in some respects, dissimilar in others, so that we simply do not know whether to count them as suicides or not.

How do open-textured accounts work? Let us suppose, for example, that a man has gone hiking along a primitive trail which at one point employs a slender log as a bridge, crossing a very swift stream. At this point on the trail, he ventures out onto the log, falls into the stream, and drowns. What kinds of details about this case would determine that it was a case of suicide, and what kinds of details would determine that it was not?

We should note that if he is in high spirits, generally satisfied with his lot, cheerfully thinking of his plans for the evening, loses his balance because the log shifts under his feet, and tries valiantly to swim to safety, then there will be no question of suicide and the death will be accidental. Or, if he is in despair, wants to die, has planned to do so at that spot by drowning, deliberately leaps from the log and makes no effort to swim, we will have no hesitation in calling his death a suicide. The cases which need careful consideration are those in between, in which only some of the factors in question are present.

Suppose our victim suffers from depression and wants to die, although he has formed no plans for his death. Accidentally, he slips on the log and falls in. But then he refuses to swim and lets himself drown. Here we have a suicide, but no significant causation by the deceased. On the other hand, suppose that he has no depression or inclination to die, but believes falsely that he can swim the stream safely. He leaps in to cool off and is drowned. Here his actions do cause his death, but it is not a suicide. The difference between these two cases rests on the presence or absence of the desire to die and the decision to do so.

But now suppose that our victim has been suffering for some time from a recurring compulsion to commit suicide. He fears this compulsion, desires not to succumb to it, has sought aid in combatting it, but it grows in him as he hikes this day, and at the bridge it drives him into the water and to his death. Although this counts as a case of suicide, the very nature of the compulsion and his struggle with it indicates that he did not desire to die nor intend to do so. In fact, the compulsion operated against his will. Thus, wanting, willing, intending, or deciding to die are not necessary conditions of suicide. In this case we should note that the operant criteria seem to be that his actions did cause his death and that he *knew* that death would result from them. (We should distinguish this case from one in which he has a compulsion to jump without regard to consequences, in which he would have jumped compulsively but died accidentally as a result. Compulsive *suicide* requires knowledge of the fatal consequences likely to result from the compulsive behavior.)

If our victim has the intention or desire to die sometime that day but has not decided yet how it should happen, or has decided that it should happen, say, by poison, later on, then he might slip, fall off the log and drown by accident. But what if he specifically wants to or intends to die by jumping off the log and drowning? Suppose that, as he is poised to jump, composing himself and gathering his willpower, a fierce gust of wind upsets him and he falls (not jumps) into the stream. Confused by the unexpected shock of the cold water, he swims as strongly as he can for shore, but drowns anyway. Although he has died as he intended, his death is accidental. Here the absence of fatal causation by the deceased is significant.

In these cases, whether or not a death due to compulsive behavior was suicide depended upon whether the deceased knew that the result of the compulsive behavior would be fatal. But such knowledge is not a necessary condition of suicide. Suppose that our victim is moody, depressed, and decides to leap from the log and try to swim the stream. He is not sure that he will survive, and not sure that he won't. If he does, he is prepared to take it as a good omen and thinks he will return to his normal life with renewed vigor. If he dies, he supposes that it will be just as well. He is leaving his fate up to chance, the gods, or whatever. Here he cannot be said to have known that he would die; nevertheless, we will count his death as a suicide. But, of course, the kind of knowledge in question is not sufficient to determine that a death is suicide: our victim may know perfectly well that falling into the stream would be fatal for him, fall accidentally, and not have committed suicide.

Finally, what of responsibility? Before considering examples, we should realize that the claim that a person is responsible for an event can mean many different things. It sometimes means that the person has caused the event for which he is responsible. Sometimes to say that a person is responsible is also to say that he is rational, has an adequate grasp of reality, understands his situation, acts within acceptable parameters, and so on. Our victim might have been clearly not responsible in this sense (he may have been suffering from a variety of neuroses or

incapacities) and still could have committed suicide by throwing himself from the log. Or, on the other hand, he could have been fully responsible in this sense and have died accidentally by falling from the log. Still, this sort of responsibility is not totally irrelevant to questions about suicide. For example, if our victim thought he could breathe water as easily as air, his killing himself by leaping into the stream would not be a case of suicide. But the significance of this kind of diminished capacity may be only that it reveals lack of knowledge or intention, and, thus, no new criterion is found here.

Again, we might consider whether a person is *morally* responsible, that is, morally liable for an action. If he were careless or negligent in attempting to cross the stream, then, our victim would be morally responsible for his accidental death. But he would not be morally responsible for the compulsive suicidal death already described. Since the question of one's moral liability often is a question of one's intentions, actions, and motives with respect to some behavior, and since intentions, causality, and motives are criterial for suicide, there will be a close connection between the determination of moral responsibility for some deaths and the determination that they are suicides.

It may be felt that there is still some other sense of responsibility in which it must be true of *all* suicides that the deceased is responsible for his own death. But I think this will turn out to amount to nothing more than a necessary condition already admitted tentatively, namely, that some reflexive description of the death be true. To say that the deceased killed himself, got himself killed, or let himself be killed, perhaps, is to attribute to him some minimal sort of responsibility for his death.

If the concept of suicide is open-textured, as I have argued, can anything be said generally about the similarities which knit the cases of suicide into a single family? It is tempting to reply that what all suicides have in common is just that they are suicides, and that the account of criteria, and the circumstances in which they are significant, *is* the account of the similarities which connect the various cases. That account, of course, should consider many more situations and circumstances than those given here, and, indeed, the account may be open-ended, so that some further elucidation of significant details always may be possible. But perhaps one useful, if somewhat vague, remark can be made about the similarities cases of suicide bear to one another.

In suicide we find a peculiar negation of the value of life. Of all persons, we should expect he whose life it is to be most sensitive to the value of a life; but in suicide, it is that very person who allows the value of his life to be overridden by other factors. The overriding of the value of the lives of others found in homicide is, somehow, less puzzling, perhaps even less awesome. To understand the suicide, we must understand how this negation of the value of one's own life is possible. But, of course, while this may say something about the way in which suicides are similar, it does not take us very far. The negation of the value of life occurs in too many ways. In some cases a life really may not be worth living further; in others delusion and irrationality may only make it seem so; in still others something of greater worth may be achieved by sacrificing life; and so on. The sense of negation of the value of life thus invoked is itself open-textured.

Failure to appreciate the open texture of the concept of suicide will result in distortion of our views as to what is and what is not suicide. Definition of the concept in terms of some nuclear set of characteristics may err in excluding some genuine cases of suicide from our consideration, or including cases which are not suicides, or distorting our conception of the nuclear

features themselves, so that we may seem to find them just where our strong intuitions about what suicide is tell us they may be.

Consider, as just one among many possible instances of error, the following speculative scenario: Suppose we became convinced that suicide could be defined, say, as self-caused death, where there is a wish to die on the part of the victim. Such a conviction would lead us to ignore the importance of intention or choice. In that case, we would refuse to count as suicides cases in which persons have no wish to die but intentionally do let themselves die, e.g., persons who refuse lifesaving medical treatment because they find the conditions of continued existence (impairment, suffering, etc.) worse than death itself. Such persons intend to die but need not *wish* to do so—they may find death the least undesirable of the choices available to them. Or, again, we might be led to count as cases of suicide cases of accidental death, e.g., a person who desires to die and unintentionally causes his own death by driving carelessly—the crucial error here being the supposition that there *must* be some causal connection between the desire and the death.

Or, what is ultimately most dangerous, we might begin to distort our conception of wishing or desiring, incorporating into it aspects of intention and causality. Thus, we might presume that intention to die always reveals a wish to die—in some cases so thoroughly suppressed that it can be detected in no other way save through the intentional self-destructive act. And we might attribute the wish to die an exaggerated causal efficacy, so that where it is present and death occurs, we presume that it *must* have been the cause of death. But this distortion of what it is to wish to die, combined with the view that all suicides involve this wish, might tend to seduce us into regarding suicide as a medical or behavioral problem, its victims suffering from a desire with which they cannot cope and which will cause their destruction unless some intervention is successful. At this point suicidal behavior would be regarded as a symptom of an illness, and the questions simply would not be raised whether it is intentional or not, rational or not. And so we would not hesitate to intervene, to treat, to commit; for we would see ourselves as rescuing victims rather than as interfering with deliberate, intentional actions. And at this point we would have not only theoretical error but a risk of unjust treatment of persons.

Now this scenario is far too speculative and simple to be an adequate account of any widely held theories or practices regarding suicide. It merely indicates ways in which an incorrect definitional stance on suicide can *tend* to contribute to error in such theories and policies. But the scenario is not sheer fantasy, either, for such tendencies have played a part in the development of some views of suicide which treat it as such, e.g., always having its origin in a death wish, or in depression, or even as always involving failure of the individual to cope with his situation. But we claim, on the contrary, that in some situations death *is* the best method of coping, as proponents of aid-in-dying may claim: when suffering in terminal illness leaves no alternative that the person views as acceptable, "suicide" is a method of coping that ought to be honored by the medical profession and by others in general. It may be a full-fledged choice even when it is not an actual wish to die.

Of course, recognition of the open-textured character of the concept of suicide will not, by itself, insure accurate assessment and just treatment of suicides and suicidal individuals or of individuals whose lives end in ways that might be labeled "suicide" but not appropriately so. But it is one step in the right direction.

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